

## The Race

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Summary: A horse race, in Laramie, provides an opportunity for Jess to test his new cowpony's acumen. Skullduggery abounds as someone tries to keep Jess from entering, or winning. In the meantime Cam Ramsay has come for a month long visit.

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by Yankee 01754

The day the letter arrived from Evergreen was the day that two young men in Laramie got excited - and panicky - at the same time.

The letter was from family friends, David and Hannah McAllister, telling them that the long anticipated visit by their niece Cam Ramsay was about to happen. Almost a year ago, Slim and Jess had stayed with the McAllister family for two weeks while Jess recovered from a persistent fever and exhaustion. They'd corresponded back and forth for months before Cam's fifteenth birthday. The big day was finally approaching. Cam was coming for a month long visit to Laramie and she was staying with them at the ranch.

Before the arrival of Daisy Cooper this wouldn't have been acceptable, two adult males with an underage female visitor who would stay overnight. It would have caused talk that would have been detrimental to everyone's reputation.

But the matronly woman, who served as cook, housekeeper, babysitter for nine-year-old Mike and surrogate mother - and aunt/grandmother - would be the perfect chaperon. Not only that but she'd be good company for the young girl and would see to it that there was a room fixed up for her. For their part, the men opened up the bunkhouse and gave it a good airing before Daisy, with Mike's help, went to work cleaning it before the two men moved in temporarily.

"Slim? Aren't you ready yet? That stage Cam's on'll be here any minute," Jess yelled from out in the yard.

"I'm comin'," Slim hollered back, from inside the house, prompting a mild scolding from Daisy Cooper as he did so.

"Slim, there's no need to yell. Why don't you just go outside?"

"Sorry Daisy." Slim grinned at her sheepishly.

"Go on with you," the motherly woman said.

"Slim, tell me again about Cam," young Mike Williams, Slim and Jess' ward, pleaded.

"I've already told you everything there is to tell, Tiger," Slim told the youngster. "Jess and I stayed with her, her aunt and uncle, on our way back from Colorado. Jess got sick and his horse had fallen and broken its leg." Slim shuddered as he remembered the reason they had gone to Colorado to begin with.

"Tell me again," Mike insisted.

"Well, she's fifteen now. She has long black hair that she usually wears in a single braid. Brown eyes. She likes horses, dogs, cats - all animals really. She's an only child - like you - but she has a lot of cousins. She likes to read but she also likes to be outside playing games with her friends, just taking a walk - and she likes to fish. She took Jess fishing one of the days we were there."

"She's not afraid of worms or touching the fish?" Mike's eyes went wide with wonder.

"She's not afraid of them," Slim explained, "But she likes to use bread. She says that taking an extra loaf of bread along with her lunch gives her something to see if the fish are hungry. It works too. She caught three more fish than Jess did with his worms."

"When's she gonna get here?"

"Any time now, Tiger," the cowboy answered. "She's coming in on the stage from Cheyenne. She had to take the train from Red Bluff, which is about five miles from where she lives in Evergreen and that got her to Cheyenne where she's getting the stage to come here."

He turned his attention to his surrogate mother at this point, "Daisy? Are you sure everything is ready for her?"

"Yes, dear, I'm sure. Mike and I scrubbed the house from top to bottom a week ago, you know that," Daisy smiled tolerantly at the nervous young man.

"Yeah, Slim," Mike chimed in, "And we painted it and put up new curtains and fixed the extra bed and I picked some flowers for her."

"I'm sure Cam will like the flowers very much," Slim assured him.

"The bunkhouse is clean and the beds made up for you and Jess," Daisy told him.

"I guess that's everything then," Slim said. "It's just that it's her first trip away from home without her aunt or uncle and it's her first time visiting the ranch. I want everything to be as nice as possible."

"Jess is just as nervous as you are about her visit," Daisy told him. "He must have asked me ten times if there was anything else that needed to be done."

"He and Cam got to be pretty good friends," Slim told her. "She kept him occupied while he was recovering - and got him reading a little more."

"Our Jess? Reading?"

"Yeah, hard to believe isn't it? She has a lot of books but the one that held his interest was a book of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales - he really liked The Emperor's New Clothes. Thought it was the funniest thing he'd ever read."

"Slim! The stage is coming! Get out here!" Jess hollered from the front yard.

The tall, blond rancher headed for the door with Daisy, and Mike, right behind him. The whole "family" was going to greet their visitor.

The stage came rumbling into the yard with Mose on the seat. For once Jess didn't try to play chicken with it - seeing how close he could come without getting run over. Not with Cam expected on the stage. He got into enough trouble - especially with Daisy - for doing it when Mike was around.

The two young men fidgeted while Mose braked, wrapped the reins around the brake handle and announced, "Sherman Ranch and Relay Station. Thirty minute break to stretch, grab a bite to eat and take care of whatever else is necessary before we leave for Laramie."

The old man climbed down from the stage and started unhooking the traces of the team in order to swap them out with the fresh one that was waiting for him.

The door to the stage opened. The first passengers to climb out were an elderly couple come to visit their son and family in Laramie. Then there were a couple of older ladies, probably in their sixties Slim guessed as he assisted them. Then, finally, came the passenger he and Jess were waiting to see - Cam Ramsay.

"Cam." Slim reached up and swung her down to the ground then enveloped her in a bear hug. "You look great!" he said with a smile for the girl after he gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"How about me? Don't I get a hug?" Jess asked as Slim released the girl.

"Of course you do! I couldn't ignore my best pal," she laughed as she

reached out for his embrace.

The two men walked her over to the house where Daisy waited with Mike.

"Cam, I'd like you to meet Mrs. Daisy Cooper - our housekeeper and 'mother' to us all. Daisy this is Cameron Blair Ramsay, better known as Cam." Slim performed the introductions.

"It's nice to meet you dear," Daisy said. "Please excuse me while I attend to the passengers. We'll get acquainted after they're gone."

"And this is Mike Williams - our ward and little brother," Jess introduced the youngest member of the family.

"Hi, Mike," Cam said with a smile. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Hi." He thrust the bouquet of flowers at her. "These are for you."

"Thank you, Mike. They're very nice."

"Cameron, dear, aren't you going to introduce us?" one of the older ladies asked.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Shaw. Slim, Jess, Mrs. Cooper, Mike - this is Mrs. Alberta Shaw and her sister, Mrs. Henrietta Kirk. Aunt Hannah and Uncle David paid them to accompany me from Red Bluff on the train and on the stage from Cheyenne."

"Ladies this is Slim Sherman and Jess Harper."

"A pleasure ladies," Slim said with a smile. The little guy is Mike Williams.

"Jess, why don't you get Cam's luggage into the house," Slim said.

"Leave that small bag, Jess," Cam told the ex-gunfighter. "I'll carry it. I have some things in it for you all."

"Here, I'll take that," Slim said as she reached for it. "Let's go inside. You can relax in the main room while the passengers have their refreshments." He turned to the two chaperons. "If you'll follow me, ladies, you can have a little lunch before the stage leaves."

They made their way inside and Slim settled Cam in one of the chairs with her bag next to her. Slim saw to it that the ladies, who had escorted Cam, were seated at the table before he went outside to help change the team and turn the tired one out in the corral. Mike hung back a little bit. He was a little shy around this big girl he didn't know. He wasn't real fond of being around girls anyway.

Cam noticed this and reached into her bag. After a little digging she found what she was looking for - a wooden ball in cup game she'd bought especially for him.

"Here, Mike," she smiled. "I brought you something."

"Thanks!" the boy grinned.

"Do you know how it works?"

"I'm not sure," the youngster answered.

"Let me show you." Cam dug around again and came up with a second one. "I like to play with one of these myself sometimes."

After five minutes of practice, Mike began to get the hang of it and was thrilled when he finally managed to get the ball in the cup. Elated with his success he challenged Cam to see who could do it the most. Cam let him win and then put hers away.

By this time the stage passengers had re-boarded and the stage took off at top speed headed for Laramie. Daisy came out of the kitchen and took a seat next to Cam.

"The boys have told me so much about you I feel I already know you, dear," she told the teenager. "You just turned fifteen didn't you?"

"Yes, ma'am. This trip is part of my birthday present. So is this dress." She indicated the dark green dress she was wearing. It was trimmed with yellow braid.

"It's lovely," the older woman told her.

"Yeah, but I'm still not real comfortable in skirts. Aunt Hannah insisted I dress up for the trip."

"Your aunt and uncle are well I take it?"

'Yes ma'am," Cam replied. "Oh, Aunt Hannah sent something for you."

She reached into her bag and came up with a couple of small packages which she handed to Daisy.

"She thought you could use both - one for you and one for your garden."

Daisy opened the packages to find some handmade lace and several packages of vegetable and flower seeds.

"How nice of her!" Daisy exclaimed in delight. "I shall have to write her a note of thanks."

"She thought you might like to put the lace on a new dress or something and the seeds are to help keep Jess fed."

Both the older lady and the young girl laughed. It was well known that Jess was always hungry. Hannah had seen for herself, just before the men had left to return home, that he had a very good appetite.

Half an hour later the two men were free to return to the house. The passengers re boarded the coach and Mose started out on his run the

twelve miles into Laramie. The stage team was cooled out and released into the corral with fresh hay forked in and water pumped into the trough. The harness had been hastily, but thoroughly, cleaned and was now hanging up in the barn ready for the team that would take the first stage through in the morning.

"Tell us what's happening in Evergreen? Is Markure still sheriff and riding herd on that Mobley fella?" Jess asked.

"Oh, yes," Cam replied. "Mr. Mobley has greatly curtailed his drinking because he's afraid Sheriff Markure will put him to work cleaning the jail, the privy out back and painting the building. The sheriff has threatened to add to his punishment next time he causes trouble."

"I knew I liked your sheriff," Slim said with a grin. "Sounds like nobody's going to need to bruise their knuckles in his chin for a while anyway."

"No," Cam said. "Mr. Mobley's very much afraid that Sheriff Markure will keep his word and add to his punishment besides."

"How are your aunt and uncle?" Slim asked

"They're fine and they send their love - well Aunt Hannah does anyway," she giggled. "Uncle David sends his regards and I'm to give him a full report on you two and how you're doing - especially his former patient over here."

She was talking about Jess. David McAllister had given strict orders that Slim was to start Jess off easy on the chores when they first got home. Jokingly the taller cowboy had said that he'd start him off with all the wood chopping and barn cleaning and household chores. Doctor McAllister had laughed and told them to get out of his office and let somebody in who really needed him.

"I'll bet your aunt is keeping busy, huh?" Jess remarked.

"Aunt Hannah is always busy - either helping Uncle David or organizing some charity event or serving on some committee or other." She reached into her bag again and pulled out a couple of packages.

"They sent this to you," she said as she handed Slim the book on the clans of Scotland and another on the clans of Ireland. "Uncle David thought you might like these." She handed him a smaller package. "That's from Aunt Hannah and me."

He opened the box to find a pin, rather like a brooch, made of pewter. The crest was fashioned in the traditional belted design representing the clansman belt wrapped around the clan crest. The symbol of a Cameron family member.

"You can wear it on your jacket or your hat," she told him. "It's the crest of the Cameron clan. You're an honorary member and so is Jess. Aunt Hannah has declared it so and she's a Cameron by birth."

"Thank you," Slim said and promptly pinned it to his hat.

"And these are for you," Cam grinned as she handed a bundle of

bright scraps and an identical box to Jess. She also gave him a box a little smaller than the one the pin was in. "She says to give them to Mrs. Cooper to mend your pants with the next time you rip the knee out." She grinned impudently at him. "The small box is from me."

The ex-gunfighter tried to glare at her but it was a waste of time. She wasn't intimidated. "You're funny, you know that?"

"Me? It wasn't my idea. Wait'll I tell Mrs. Cooper how you ripped the knee out of those pants!" Cam's face was alight with merriment as she remembered how he'd tripped over a tree root while playing hide and seek.

"You wouldn't!"

"Wouldn't I?" Cam gave him a wicked grin and started, "It's like this, Mrs. Cooper, Jess had been sick and he wasn't allowed to do much at first so my friends and I decided to keep him from getting bored. We invited him to play games with us..."

"Cam!"

Daisy laughed in delight. It was obvious that this young girl had a way of keeping her beloved, and mischievous, "middle child" in line. Mort Corey often called him an impulsive, but invaluable, young reprobate.

"You can tell me later - when Jess isn't around to hear"

"I'll tell you about how they both fell in the creek on the way home one day too," Cam told her.

"It was all Jess' fault," Slim said when he heard that.

"Was not!" his friend responded. "It was Cam's. Daisy, don't believe a word she tells you!"

"This should be very interesting," Daisy laughed.

"Oh, it is," Cam promised with a wicked grin.

"Jess? Aren't you going to open the box?" Mike was curious.

"Oh. Yeah."

His box contained a one inch shamrock on a chain. It was made of pewter as well but had green gemstones, resembling emeralds, encrusted in the leaves.

"We thought Galway should have something to remind you of his 'Irish roots'," she grinned, "since Mr. Quinn is Irish and that colt came from his farm. The idea is to hang it from his bridle as a decoration."

"Miss Cam?"

"Just call me Cam, Mike," the teen said.

"Would you like to see my pets?"

"Of course I would, and you can show me where I'm going to sleep so I can change out of this dress into my pants and such."

Mike smiled. "Okay. Follow me."

Mike manfully took Cam's remaining bag as he led the way to the room she would share with Daisy for the duration of her visit.

It didn't take the girl long to change out of her traveling clothes into brown pants and a green plaid shirt. She exchanged her high top shoes for a pair of well worn boots while she was at it. After hanging her dress up and quickly unpacking she joined Mike outside and was promptly introduced to his pets. She was especially delighted to meet Twink - Mike's deer and Chip, his squirrel.

"She's absolutely adorable!" Cam exclaimed.

Mike beamed. He loved Twink - maybe even more than any of his other pets which included a squirrel and a dog named Buttons whom Jess was often heard to remark was a lousy watchdog. Slim disagreed because Buttons did once warn them about three men - actually two men and a delinquent teenager - trying to steal some of their stock. Mike didn't care what they said. He loved Buttons and that was all that mattered.

"There's an old friend of yours waiting near the barn to see you," Jess said as he came up to the two youngsters.

"I'll be right there," Cam said as she gave Twink one last pat and thanked Mike for introducing her to his beloved menagerie.

She went over to the barn where she found Jess' adored Galway standing by the corral. Drifter, Jess' older mount, was tied next to him.

"Galway! You gorgeous thing you!" Cam exclaimed in delight as she hugged him. "He looks great," she told Jess.

"He's gonna be a good cow pony when I get through training him," Jess said proudly.

"He's got the sturdy build of both the Morgans and the Quarter Horses Mr. Quinn always said," Cam told him. "The Morgans were originally bred, back in Vermont, to work on the farms plowing, hauling timber and pulling wagons. His ancestor did all that and ran races - winning consistently - as well."

Jess' eyes lit up. He'd raced Drifter a few times, and won several of them by a fair margin. Now it seemed like he might have another winner on his hands.

"Are we going to show her some of the ranch or are you two going to stand around admiring that horse all day?" Slim asked as he approached them.

"Oh, please show me around this part of the ranch," Cam said, "and starting tomorrow you can show me the farther reaches."

"Can I go too?" Mike asked.



"Sure," Slim said, "you can come with us. As a matter of fact you can ride with me."

Jess offered Cam Drifter's reins and gave her a boost into the saddle. Being unsure of her experience in riding, he decided that his older horse would be a good steady mount for her while he continued working with Galway.

They took a quick ride around showing her Baxter's ridge and some of the other sights. By the time they got back, the last stage out of Laramie was pulling in. The two men quickly got the fresh team hooked up and the stage on its way. By then it was time to do the evening chores and wash up for supper.

Not long after supper, Cam's eyelids began to droop. It had been a long week of packing and traveling and it was beginning to catch up with her. Daisy hustled her off to bed and, when she returned, did the same for Mike. Slim sat at his desk working on the ranch accounts while Jess cleaned their revolvers and the rifle they kept over the mantle out of Mike's reach. Daisy took care of setting the table for breakfast and planned the next day's meals, including what she would offer the stage passengers for refreshments or lunch.

Shortly after that she retired for the night. Slim and Jess took a walk out to the barn, and the corral, and made sure that the stock was settled for the night. Then they, too, headed for bed.

By nature an early riser, Cam was up before anyone else in the house. By the time Daisy was up, washed and dressed, a fire was going in the cook stove. By the time Slim got up, washed, shaved and dressed, the teams for the first stage were groomed and all the horses had fresh water and hay. The team, and those horses that she instinctively knew were going to be working that day, had a manger full of oats as well. By the time Jess got up, sleepyhead that he was, Daisy had firewood and water and the coffee was ready. By the time Mike was up the chickens had been fed and the eggs gathered and brought in to the kitchen.

"Who did all this?" Daisy wondered as the men of the house came out of the bunkhouse into the kitchen.

Her question was answered as the door opened and Cam entered with two full buckets of milk.

"Cameron Blair Ramsay!" Slim exclaimed. "Did you do all this?"

"Yup," she grinned. "I woke up real early and you all were still asleep so I thought I'd get things started."

"You didn't have to do that dear," Daisy scolded her. "You're our guest."

"I thought I was part of the family," Cam said. "As such I should pull my own weight. I have chores to do at home, you know. The chickens are my responsibility and I often hitch Uncle David's horse to his buggy when he has an emergency, while he's trying to eat his meal - whichever meal that may be."

"You're impossible," Slim told her.

"I thought Jess was the one who was impossible," Cam answered him.

"Never mind," Daisy said heading off the battle of wits she saw coming. "Slim, you take care of the milk Cam brought in. Strain it and set it aside so the cream can rise. Mike will need to churn some butter later this week."

Daisy wasn't long in frying ham, eggs and potatoes and she had biscuits, hot from the oven, as well. Cam insisted on helping her put the food on the table.

It was while they were eating that the men started discussing the planned tour of the ranch they were to give their guest.

"You know, Slim," Jess said between bites, "If Cam's gonna see the rest of the ranch we really ought to get her a hat. Her aunt would have a fit if Cam were to get sun sick from not having any protection from the sun."

"You're right," his partner said. "We'll take her in to Laramie to the General Store and get her one - and probably a bandanna or two as well."

"And gloves," Jess added.

"Don't I have any say in this?" the subject of their conversation asked.

"No!" both men said simultaneously.

Cam just rolled her eyes and concentrated on finishing her breakfast so she could help Daisy with the dishes before they left.

Shortly after breakfast and the departure of the morning stage for Cheyenne, the men packed Cam and Mike into the buckboard leaving Daisy to her household chores without having the rambunctious nine-year-old, or the overgrown children, the men, underfoot.

They pulled up in front of the General Store about an hour later and went directly toward the area that held hats and such.

Slim, and Jess, looked them over and tried to decide on what they thought would be the best style for their young friend. Cam got tired of waiting and snatched their hats off of their heads, dodging them as they tried to take them back. She stood in front of the mirror and put Slim's hat on her head first.

"Nope. I don't think so," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "Not my style. I have better taste than this."

Mike giggled as Slim's face turned red.

Jess was the next victim of her wit.

"Definitely not. Too big - in more ways than one."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked as he took his hat off her head.

"Just what I said," she evaded answering the question neatly. "Too big."

"The hat?"

"No." A beat. "Your head."

"You little..."

Cam just laughed at him as he reached out to grab her so he could tickle her the way he did Mike when the youngster said something like that. Mike had already told Daisy, in Jess' presence, that he could do better than growing up like Slim and Jess - he could grow up smart like her. Cam was quicker than Jess and managed to get away from him.

"Didn't your aunt teach you about having respect for your elders?" Slim growled.

"Sure she did - Uncle David too," Cam giggled as she ducked away. "I doubt she had you two in mind though."

She backed right into Sheriff Mort Corey as he approached their little group. Mike had dissolved into giggles and couldn't stop. The sheriff looked at Mike, the girl and at his friends, who by now were starting to laugh themselves, and raised his eyebrows.

"What exactly is going on here?" he demanded to know.

"Hi Mort," Slim said trying to calm down his laughter and poking Jess in the ribs at the same time.

"Hi yourself," the older man said. "Now answer my question."

"It's all right, Sheriff," the teen said. "The fellas brought me in to get a hat and I got bored waiting for them to decide which one was right for me." Her eyes danced as she finished her explanation, "So I stole their hats and told Slim I have better taste than to wear one like his and implied, to Jess, that he has a big head and that's why his hat doesn't fit me."

Mort's laughter could be heard all the way to the street. It seemed like the females in their lives had a way of keeping these two young men on their toes.

"Are you going to introduce me to your friend?" the older man asked. "Or are you going to keep laughing like a pair of hyenas?"

"What's a hyena?" Mike asked.

"A wild animal that's somewhat like a dog," Cam explained to him.

"Oh."

"Sorry Mort," the taller of the pair found his voice first. He put his arm around Cam's shoulders and pulled her close to his side to keep her mischief making tendency under control - at least for a couple of minutes. "Mort Corey, this is Cameron Blair Ramsay. She's

better known as Cam." He smiled as he completed the introductions.  
"Cam, this is our friend - and sheriff - Mort Corey."

"Hello Miss Ramsay, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"Hello Mr. Corey," Cam replied. "It's a pleasure to meet you too. I'll bet you can tell me a lot of stories about these two that I can take home with me."

"Where's home young lady?" the lawman asked her.

"Evergreen."

"Evergreen, Wyoming?"

"Yes, sir. My uncle is the town physician. My aunt works part time as his nurse. She and Slim's mother were best friends for years."

"I'll bet your aunt could tell me a few stories about Slim," the older man grinned at the taller of his two young friends.

"If they'd let me talk," Cam grinned mischievously, "I'd tell you the stories I'm going to tell Mrs. Cooper."

"Cam," Jess growled.

"The way he's squirming," Mort said to the girl, "they must be pretty good."

"Oh they are," she said. "Why don't you come for supper, say around five, if you can. I'll tell you while I tell her and they won't be able to stop me."

"What's Miss Daisy planning for supper?"

"Ham, baked potatoes, corn on the cob, plenty of fresh biscuits - provided she can keep Jess out of them," Cam joked, "And peach cobbler for dessert. I asked her this morning."

"Sounds good," Corey said. "You tell Miss Daisy to expect me. I'll have my deputy watch the town for me for a couple of hours or so."

That afternoon. after lunch, Slim sat in the main room reading the Laramie Gazette. An article about an orphanage in a neighboring town, needing to expand, caught his eye.,

"According to the Gazette," Slim said, "the orphanage over in Brimfield, is still lacking about two thousand dollars of what they need to rebuild after the fire. Fundraising's going very slow. They've only got about a thousand of what they need to rebuild, expand and furnish a new facility. Sure would be nice to be able to help out. Maybe we can lend a hand with the building when they finally raise enough money."

"What happened to that orphanage, Slim?" Cam asked.

"Well, it started out as kind of run down. Then they put too many kids in it. A storm damaged part of the roof and a fire finished it

off. They've placed the children in a lot of different homes for now. Some good. Some bad. They're anxious to rebuild only making it bigger."

"Yeah," Jess growled. Some are \_real \_bad and shouldn't have none of the kids."

"I agree with you pard," Slim told him. "Not much anyone can do about it though. The sooner they have the money they need the better."

"Dinner's ready," Daisy announced from the kitchen.

Cam left the main room to help the older woman carry the dishes from the kitchen to the main room. Mort Corey arrived just as they were putting it on the table.

"Sure smells good," the sheriff commented as they sat down at the table.

It was a merry group that ate dinner at the Sherman place that night. Slim knew a few stories about Cam that he'd heard from his mother or her aunt over the years but she had ten years worth of stories about him, and Mort loved the story about Jess playing hide and seek and ripping the knee out of a pair of pants. Even better was the one about the two younger men falling into the creek when Jess lost his balance on the log and pulled Slim in with him.

"Wet poodle dog eh?" he chuckled. "I reckon that's a good way to describe him when his hair is all wet."

"I'll remember that remark the next time you want me to fill in for you," Jess growled. "You'll ruin my reputation - the two of you - with that kind of talk."

"Reputation? What reputation is that Jess?"

Cam was trying hard not to giggle but it was hopeless - and contagious. Slim, Daisy and Mort all started laughing while Jess frowned. Mike just looked confused.

"What's a poodle?" the boy asked.

"Here, I'll show you," Cam said. She got the paper tablet she'd been writing a letter on from the chair she'd been sitting in prior to dinner, and drew a quick sketch of a poodle.

"Why does that make you think of Jess?" he asked when he'd seen it.

His remark was too much for three of the adults. They all started laughing again.

"On that note," Sheriff Corey said, "I think I'd better head back to town. I told Cal I'd be back by eight o'clock and it's nearly seven now." He walked to the door and picked up his hat from the table to the right, putting it on as he went out the door. The others followed him out onto the porch.

"Supper was delicious as always Mrs. Cooper," he said. "I'll see you

boys next time you come into town. It was a pleasure meeting you, Cam. I hope you enjoy your stay. See you Mike." He tousled the youngster's hair as he left.

"See ya Mort," Jess said.

"Bye, Mort," Slim bade their friend good bye.

"Don't be a stranger, Mort," Daisy told him. "You know you're always welcome."

An hour later Mike was sent off to bed. The others stayed up a little longer with Slim issuing firm orders to Cam not to get up before the chickens and do everybody's chores. She was to sleep in until breakfast was almost ready - or else.

"Or else what?" she demanded.

"Or else I'll turn you over my knee and give you a good paddling," he answered.

"Slim!" Daisy was shocked.

"He won't do it, Mrs. Cooper," Cam assured her. "He's not fast enough to catch me anyway."

On that note the men went out to make a last check of the stock in the barn and in the corral and ensure that everything was secure elsewhere - gates, doors and fences. It was ten o'clock by that time and everyone retired for the night.

Next morning dawned rainy and chilly. Slim decided it would be a good day to get caught up on the books while Jess did some work in the barn repairing harness. Cam decided to keep Mike out from under Daisy's feet so she read to him, played games and told him stories about the Scottish clans and their customs.

"If I had my bagpipes with me I'd teach you how to play some of the easier pieces of music."

"You have bagpipes?" Mike's eyes were wide with wonder. "What are bagpipes," he asked, suddenly unsure of himself.

The girl chuckled. "Get me that tablet I was drawing on last night and I'll draw you a picture."

Slim looked up at her from his desk. "I, for one, am glad you don't have your bagpipes," he said. "I don't need to be chasing frightened livestock all over the countryside after you've scared them half to death."

"Very funny," she said. "You know I play perfectly well - Gordy taught me."

"That's the part that scares me," the rancher joked. "Anything that cousin of yours puts his hand to, in the line of mischief - and teaching you how to play the bagpipes definitely qualifies - is bound to be trouble."

"So says you."

"So says I," he affirmed. "He always was the ringleader..."

"Whom you followed willingly enough from what I've heard," Cam retorted.

"That's enough you two," Daisy scolded. "I'm sure Cam plays beautifully."

"I wouldn't say that Mrs. Cooper, the bagpipes aren't exactly a 'beautiful' instrument but they can be thrilling, exciting..."

"Loud," Slim said.

"Oh hush up," his visitor told him. "You're beginning to annoy me."

"Slim! Be nice!" Daisy said to her eldest.

"I think I'll go join Jess in the barn before I get in any more trouble with you women," the tall rancher said and left to do just that.

"Now that he's gone, we can have a nice talk," Cam told the older woman.

Daisy took a seat near the girl with her sewing supplies and a large basket of mending. She sighed, 'I don't know how they do it. Jess always has seams out and holes in the knees of his pants, Slim's got snags and tears from the barbed wire or nails and Mike is always losing buttons. It's next to impossible to keep their clothes mended.'

"Let me help, Mrs. Cooper," Cam said. "I'm very good with a needle and thread."

So saying she took several of Mike's shirts and the can of buttons and set to work replacing the missing ones. By the time the older woman had one of Slim's shirts repaired Cam had reattached buttons, and repaired a couple of small tears, in three of Mike's shirts. It wasn't that Daisy was slow but Cam was noted for being very quick, neat and accurate whether sewing a whole garment, fixing torn seams or sewing on buttons.

"So you children got Jess to relax and have some fun and he played hide and seek? That's how he tore the knee out of his pant leg?" Daisy laughed as Cam finished her story.

"Yes, ma'am! He didn't see the tree root and wound up tripping over it. He wasn't very happy and I think he was having a hard time not saying what he wanted to. Then, the next day was the day we went to town and the fellas fell off the log into the water." Cam's eyes sparked as she related the story for a second time. "You should have heard Jess yell when he thought he didn't have any clean, dry clothes to put on. Aunt Hannah had given Slim some money to buy some for him but he didn't tell him until he got the story about his torn pants out of him."

"Those two! Sometimes I wonder who the child is in the family - Mike

or one of them!" Daisy thoroughly enjoyed the story.

"Even better is the way he ate once the restrictions on his diet were lifted," Cam giggled. "Aunt Hannah had heard, from Slim, that Jess can eat twice as much as he does - 'eats me out of house and home' I believe were the words he used. She didn't know how true that statement was until the night we had the fresh trout and then the pot roast the night before they left for home. Slim told him Galway was going to get swaybacked from carrying him. Aunt Hannah said he may have been stuffed silly, but he was healthy again and that's what mattered."

Mike came back with the writing tablet just then, having been distracted by daydreams of highland chiefs and their clans. Cam quickly drew a sketch of a set of bagpipes but was unable to get the boy to understand how they sounded. It was just something you had to hear for yourself. No human could imitate the sound.

The next morning was Friday. Daisy went through her supplies and made up a shopping list for the men to take into Laramie. Between them, Slim and Jess had good appetites (though Slim said that Jess ate enough for both of them all by himself) but there were the stage passengers to feed, the drivers and shotgun guards and their guest. The two of them set off for town as soon as the morning stage was gone.

They waved a cheerful good-bye to the others as they headed west to do the shopping. Daisy was planning on doing the washing while Cam and Mike would do some exploring of the area close to the ranch. Mike was anxious to show his new friend all of his favorite places.

The men's first stop was the General Store where they dropped off Daisy's list. From there they proceeded to the hardware store. While Slim, and Jess, could manage some things on the forge at home - like horseshoes - they didn't make nails and they most certainly did not produce barbed wire. They had to pick up some of both because areas of fence, to the north, had fallen into disrepair due to rotten fence posts and cattle leaning against it until it sagged. In addition, a few days before Cam's arrival there had been a thunderstorm. Lightning had struck a tree and brought it down on a section of fence that now needed to be completely rebuilt.

They stopped at the bakery to get a treat to tide them over until they had lunch at Maudie's Caf  . There was a sign, in the bakery, about a dance the next night. The two men made plans to pack up the family, and their visitor, and come in for it - at least for a little while. It would be an opportunity for Cam to meet some of the other residents of Laramie.

"Hey Slim! Look at this!" Jess stopped outside the feed and grain store to look at a poster.

"Laramie Horse Race. July 25th. Twenty dollar entry fee. Winner gets two thousand dollars and a silver trophy. Open to all Laramie residents and those from the surrounding farms and ranches. Complete rules available at the Print Shop, General Store and the Sheriff's Office."

Slim whistled. "Sounds exciting. Thinking about entering Drifter?"



"No, not Drifter. Galway."

"Really?"

"Yeah. You've seen for yourself that he's pretty fast."

"That's true, but you've never raced him before and you don't know if Mr. Quinn raced him. He told me that colt was only green broke so I doubt it."

"You always say you'll never know unless you try," Jess pointed out. "I'm gonna enter Galway." He reached in his pocket and came up short on cash. "Uh, Slim?"

"I know," his friend said. "You need an advance on your wages."

"I knew you'd understand," his partner said with a grin as he took the money from Slim who just rolled his eyes.

Together they went to Mort Corey's office to get a copy of the rules and a blank entry form.

"Horse's name - Galway. Owner - Jess Harper. Owner's address? What the heck?"

"It means where do you live," their friend, the sheriff, told him with a grin.

"Oh. Owner's Address - Sherman Ranch and Relay Station 12 miles outside of Laramie."

"You're really planning on racing that colt, huh?" Mort raised his eyebrows.

"Yeah. Something wrong with that?" Jess wanted to know.

"No, but you're up against some pretty stiff competition. O'Brien's entering his speedy little mare, Shannon. Destry's entering Lightning and Swanson's entering his gray Connemara, Storm Cloud."

Slim whistled, "That is stiff competition."

"You don't think Galway can handle it?" Jess was a little irritated at his friends' apparent lack of support.

"Didn't say that, Jess," Corey told him. "Just letting you know what you're up against."

"Who's putting up the prize money?" Jess wondered.

"A group of merchants in town for the most part," Mort answered. "And Dave Swanson's putting up a silver trophy as well. It's to be engraved with the winning horse and rider's names and the date of the race."

"Swanson's putting up money and a trophy?" Slim was suspicious. "He must be pretty sure he's going to win."

"He's got a pretty good chance," their friend told him. "Don't worry."

I'm watching him, as best I can, to make sure he doesn't try anything to fix the race so's he can walk away with the money and the trophy."

"Don't matter. I've got as good a chance as any of them. Swanson's fancy race horse don't have any better chance of winning than Galway or any of the others."

"If you're determined to race Galway, instead of Drifter," Slim told him, "then let's pay your entry

fee and get back home. You're going to need to do some serious training over the next two weeks."

"Let's have a couple of drinks first," Jess suggested.

"See ya Mort," Slim said as they started for the door.

"See ya boys and Jess, be careful how you talk about that colt of yours. Swanson's not to be trusted. There's no telling what he might do to make sure he wins."

"Thanks for the warning," the Texan said, "but I think I can handle him."

Slim and Jess walked out the door onto the boardwalk and walked back to the General Store. Since their order wouldn't be ready for another half hour or so, they decided to follow up on Jess' idea of having a couple of drinks.

Slim hesitated for a minute, thinking of Cam, who wasn't used to men who drank but figured two drinks apiece wouldn't hurt. It wasn't like they were out to get drunk. Decision made, the two men walked over to the saloon. From there they would pick up their order at the General Store and be on their way home.

Jess went into the saloon first and got a bottle and a couple of glasses. Slim followed close behind and saved them a table near the window. They had no intention of having more than a couple of drinks and wanted to catch up on some of the news of the town. Dave Swanson was there and immediately approached the two cowboys.

"Harper, I just heard the news that you're entering that black colt of yours in the race on the twenty-fifth. You really think he has a chance against my Storm Cloud?" The freight operator was a big man, somewhat older than Jess and Slim with red hair and green eyes. He had an annoying way of talking down to people he felt were beneath him and that included almost everybody in town - especially Jess and Slim. Jess was just a hired hand and Slim a small businessman. Neither of them would normally be worthy of his attention.

"I reckon he's got as good a chance as any of the other horses in the race," was the reply.

"Jess just now signed up," Slim said. "How'd you hear about it?"

"Word gets around."

"I'll bet," Jess said. "You've probably got eyes and ears everywhere."

We heard how you put up money and a fancy trophy. Word is you're awfully sure of yourself." He fixed Swanson with a skeptical look. "Anybody could win - even my untried colt."

"You wouldn't care to make a wager on that, would you?" Swanson asked.

"No, I wouldn't," the dark haired partner said as Slim looked on worriedly.

"Afraid of losing?" he was taunted.

"No. Just don't bet on races."

"You're afraid you'll lose," the tall, husky redhead claimed.

"No. I just don't bet on races. I'm not a gambler," was the response he got.

"I say you're a coward."

Jess' temper was starting to boil but it was Slim who spoke up before it could explode into unwanted action.

"Swanson, we came in here to have a couple of drinks before we go home. We didn't come in here to debate which horse has a better chance of winning the race." His light blue eyes were wintry. "Now back off before \_I \_do something we'll both regret."

"All right, all right." The big redhead backed off.

"We'll see who's got the better horse come race day," Sherman said. "In the meantime lay off Jess."

He turned to his partner, so much like a younger brother to him after three years of friendship. "Come on, Jess, let's go home. The air around here smells like skunk and it's taken my desire for a drink away."

Slim stood, picked up his hat and steered Jess toward the door. Both young men were steaming but the older one's common sense prevailed. They went to the General Store, picked up their order and drove home.

Dinner was almost ready when they got there. Fried chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, fresh corn, with blackberry pudding for dessert. Mike had taken Cam berry picking. Between them they had picked enough for pudding and for cobbler another night.

As dessert was served the visitor to the Sherman ranch wrapped her arms around her older host's neck and said, "You're going to take me fishing soon, right? I think Jess needs a chance to try - mind you I said \_try \_to beat me. Besides I want a chance to beat you again! It's been a long time."

"We'll take you fishing Monday, if the weather is good," Slim promised. "There's a dance tomorrow night. I thought it would be fun for you and you can meet some of our neighbors."

Cam looked doubtful. She was somewhat insecure about her looks and

didn't trust boys who told her how pretty she was. She didn't always trust Slim when he told her because he liked to tease her. She thought Jess told her that because he was just being nice to a young friend.

"Now, Cam, it will do you good to meet some of the young people from the area," Daisy told her. "You can't keep to yourself or the boys all the time. It's not good for you."

"That's what Aunt Hannah says," the girl confided, "but I still don't like these things that much. They're usually pretty boring. And the boys say things they don't mean."

Jess tugged at her braid. "You just wear that pretty green dress you were wearing when you got here and you'll have the boys flocking around you so thick Slim and me'll have to drive 'em off with a stick."

The teen looked doubtful but promised to try to have fun. That's all the adults could ask for. Slim knew her well enough to realize that it was her insecurities that were the problem. With Daisy's help, and guidance, maybe she would be able to get over them some. He said as much to the older woman after Cam had gone to bed.

"She's a pretty girl," Slim said, "but she's got this idea in her head that she's ugly. Somebody - that Mobley fella or someone like him - made a mean comment about her nose being crooked and she's taken it to heart ever since. Even her aunt can't get her to realize how pretty she really is."

"Don't worry about it Slim," Daisy told him. "We'll do what we can for her but it's up to her whether to believe anybody or not. Us telling her how pretty she is isn't going to do it." She fixed her "middle son" with a fierce glare, "And don't either of you be putting the boys up to saying anything. If you do and she finds out, you'll set back any progress she makes while she's here."

"Aw Daisy," Jess protested.

"Aw Daisy nothing! You'll do more harm than good if you try something like that. You just let nature take its course."

"Don't worry, Daisy, I'll keep him in line," Slim reassured her.

They all retired for the evening with plans to get chores done as soon as possible, and the stages tended to so that they could clean up for the dance before supper.

The following day was a gorgeous summer day. Warm, sunny and no threat of rain. The stages were tended to, passengers fed and sent on their way in short order. Before they knew it, it was time to clean up and dress for the dance.

Cam was given the privilege of taking the first bath. The men were hustled out of the house after setting up the tub in Daisy's room and filling it. Cam undressed and quickly got into the tub. She scrubbed until she was clean and then washed her hair. Being long and thick it took a lot of water to get it wet enough to lather and then to rinse the soap out completely. Daisy helped her with it and then gave her a

thick towel to wrap around her hair while she dressed. Cam donned her undergarments and petticoat, then sat on her bed to towel dry her hair. After a few minutes she put her dress on and went outside to finish drying her hair in the warm air.

Two hours later everyone - including the ever reluctant Mike and Jess - had had baths and donned clean clothes. Slim and Jess, dressed in good trousers and white shirts, with black string ties as well as a neat blue coat for Slim and a black one for Jess, went out to the barn to hitch the team to the buckboard. Mike tagged along as the ladies were busy fixing their hair.

Despite Daisy's urging, Cam insisted on wearing her hair in its usual single braid. She wasn't inclined to do anything different with it - it never seemed to matter if she wore it down, in a single braid or two braids in a coronet around her head. She'd never met up with a boy she believed was sincere in his compliments.

They were barely out the door when the girl suddenly started having second thoughts about agreeing to attend the dance. She stopped short in her tracks and turned back toward the house intending to stay behind.

"Cam!" Slim called her. "Come on, get in the buckboard."

"I've changed my mind," she told him. "I'd rather stay here and read or something. You go on without me."

"You promised you'd give it a try," he said as he approached.

"I changed my mind," she nearly cried. "I'd rather stay here by myself."

Daisy looked at her with concern. "Are you sure you're not sick dear?"

"No, ma'am. I'm not sick. I just don't want to go to the dance is all. Aunt Hannah lets me stay home when I decide I don't want to go."

"I can't let you stay here alone," Slim told her. "We're twelve miles from town. If anything happened I wouldn't be able to look your folks in the eye."

"I'll be fine. Just go on without me."

The adults all exchanged looks. It was obvious that Cam's insecurities, about her looks, had come to the forefront.

It was Jess who, with his gentle ways with frightened creatures and children, was able to convince her not to stay behind.

"Slim and I'll take turns dancing with you until you feel comfortable," he promised. "Won't we Slim?"

"Sure," his partner agreed. "There's nothing to be afraid of. You'll have a good time - I promise."

"Come on, Cam," Jess coaxed. "It'll be fun. We won't leave your side until you're comfortable. I swear it."

"Word of honor?"

"Word of honor," the Texan swore.

"Okay. I'll go."

"That's our girl," Slim said from his place on the buckboard seat.

Jess gave her a quick hug and a kiss on the forehead before boosting her into the seat of the buckboard alongside Daisy and then climbing in the back with Mike.

It was a nerve wracking twelve mile drive for the teen. While the others talked animatedly about how much fun it would be, she got more nervous - and scared - with each passing mile. Daisy noticed and squeezed her hand in a gesture meant to reassure her. She might as well not have bothered. Nothing was going to calm the girl down. She truly hated these social events. She preferred much smaller gatherings with her aunt, uncle and just a few friends.

The dance was in full swing by the time the group from the relay station got there. Lanterns lit the dance floor on the edge of town near the livery stable. A group of about ten of Mike's friends swarmed the wagon even before Slim had a chance to bring the team to a complete stop. Receiving permission to join them, the youngster jumped down and ran off to an isolated area where they could observe but not be trapped by the girls.

Slim helped Daisy down while Jess reached up for Cam. Feeling her trembling, he squeezed her left hand and tucked it into the crook of his right elbow. Slowly he made his way through the crowd of townspeople who greeted him. Jess introduced Cam to each one noting that, even though she seemed terrified to be there, she was polite and acknowledged each introduction.

He found a place where they could sit and watch. More than one young woman his age looked at him eagerly. Each one was hoping he would ask them to dance. Slim claimed a partner right away and Mose asked Daisy. Cam smiled faintly as she watched the older couple make their way around the dance floor. Daisy looked at Cam in concern several times. It was soon obvious that Cam definitely was not happy - or comfortable - being at the dance. Even Jess wasn't able to get her to relax and enjoy herself. She refused to dance even with her hosts. She truly wanted to escape from this affair and go back to the ranch.

The dark haired cowboy left her for a few minutes to get some punch and to confer with his partner. Both of them were at a loss as to what to do. More than one boy from Laramie, or one of the surrounding farms and ranches, approached her only to be soundly rejected. She wasn't having a good time but they couldn't just take her back to the ranch and leave her by herself.

It was while they were talking that Tommy Everett approached her. Tommy was sixteen, tall with blond hair and blue eyes. He was one of the nicest boys in the Laramie area and Slim, in particular, was happy to see him approach Cam. Tommy wasn't the kind to pass out phony compliments.

"Hi," the boy said as he approached Cam. "You're new here aren't you?"

"I'm just visiting friends," the girl replied.

"Who?"

"Slim Sherman and Jess Harper," Cam told him. "Slim's practically a member of the family - his Ma and my aunt were best friends for years."

"Have you known Mr. Harper very long?"

"No. I only met Jess a year ago but he's practically family, too. They stayed with me and my family - my aunt and uncle - on their way home from Colorado. Jess had gotten sick and Slim brought him to our house so my uncle could take care of him. My uncle's a doctor."

"That was very nice of your aunt and uncle - to take them in like that."

"It's something they'd do. I've known Slim since I was five and my aunt and uncle adopted me after my parents died. I grew up with his brother Andy - sort of. We used to visit once in a while and they'd come to see us."

The music started up again and Tommy turned to Cam, "Would you like to dance?"

"I don't think so," she replied, being uncertain of why he was asking her.

"Why not? It's fun."

"I'm just not terribly fond of it. Besides, I think Slim or Jess - or both of them - put you up to asking."

"No, they didn't!" Tommy protested. "I haven't seen them to talk to in a couple of weeks."

"Honest?"

"Honest. Now how about that dance?"

"Weeeelllll, okay."

"Good!"

Tommy extended a hand to help her up and they walked to the dance floor. It seemed like Tommy had the right touch. His sincerity had won the nervous girl over.

Slim and Jess stood on the sidelines watching as the two youngsters danced. Both had huge grins on their faces as they saw Cam finally relax and start to enjoy herself. They'd been worried and fretting because they'd promised Daisy they wouldn't try to set her up but were awfully close to breaking their word. Tommy had taken care of it just by being his normal, friendly and outgoing self.

Seeing that Cam was finally having some fun Jess sought out Carrie McIntosh, daughter of one of the other ranchers in the area. Carrie was twenty with red hair and green eyes that sparkled with pleasure as the dark haired cowboy walked her out to the dance floor.

Two of Tommy's friends were permitted to cut in before he was able to reclaim his partner. After the fifth dance, this one a lively reel, the teens decided to get some punch and take a break.

"Dancing is thirsty business," Cam said to Tommy.

"Yeah." He grinned as he escorted her to a chair on the sidelines.

When Slim, and then Jess, drifted over to see how she was doing they weren't even noticed. Cam was surrounded by other teens with whom she was exchanging stories about their families and friends. Cam's stories about her uncle's medical practice intrigued Tommy who had a medical career in mind.

Slim and Jess exchanged looks. Then, with huge smiles on their faces went to find new dance partners and continue enjoying themselves. Scant minutes after they did trouble reared its ugly head. A group of rowdies from a neighboring town invaded the dance and immediately started causing trouble.

One of them, a tall black haired youth of twenty, approached Cam and Tommy and tried to cut in.

"My dance," he said as he pulled Cam away from her partner.

"I'm already dancing with Tommy," she told him angrily. "Go away." She turned back to her partner.

"I said my dance," the young man told her as he pulled her to him while shoving Tommy toward his equally rude friends.

"And I said 'no'." Cam was angry and a little frightened.

"Why you little..." He hauled off and slapped her causing her to stagger backward a few steps.

Tommy tried to go to her aid but Colfax's friends held him back. Cam's cry of pain and distress got Slim and Jess' attention as did the chorus of angry voices. They made their way through the crowd to Cam's side. Both were furious when they saw her holding her cheek and in tears.

"What's going on here?" Slim demanded of the crowd around the teens.

"Pete Colfax here, tried to force Cam to dance with him," Dan Fulton who was Tommy's best friend, explained. "When she refused he slapped her."

Jess gently pulled Cam's hand away from her cheek. His temper rose quickly when he saw the red mark left by young Colfax's hand.

"Are you all right?" he asked quietly while keeping a gentle hand on



her shoulder.

"Yes. No. I don't know!" She started sobbing again. It wasn't just her cheek that hurt - her feelings were hurt as well. She'd never been treated like this before. Jess wrapped his arms around the crying girl and held her tight.

Daisy made her way to them, from the far side of the dance floor, with Mose making a path through the crowd for her. Taking a look at the distraught girl she took charge and led her to a seat on the sidelines. Some of the other girls followed. The men and boys faced off against the out-of-towners.

"You always treat young ladies like that?" Slim asked angrily. "I ought to take you over my knee and paddle you good!"

"She had it coming!"

"She had it coming?" Slim was outraged and Jess looked ready to tear the kid apart.

"She refused to dance with me."

"Probably had good reason," the tall rancher said, "If your attitude is any indication of what transpired."

A new voice was heard as Dave Swanson joined the crowd. The freight company owner, and part time gambler, was dressed in his usual black coat, embroidered vest over immaculate white ruffled shirt as well as black trousers and spotless black boots. He exuded an air of confidence with a touch of arrogance. It was one of the things that irritated Jess and many others.

"What's going on? Why are you threatening my nephew?"

"Your nephew needs to learn some manners," Slim told him. "He slapped a young lady because she refused to dance with him."

"He threatened to take me over his knee like I was some little kid.," whined Pete. "All I wanted was one dance with her."

A chorus of outraged voices were heard.

"He forced her!"

"She was perfectly happy dancing with Tommy then he came along!"

"Your friend seemed to be having a good time until Pete and his bunch got here!"

The voices got louder. There was some pushing and shoving and the group was on the verge of an all out brawl when Mort Corey arrived on the scene.

"What's going on here?"

"Nothing, Sheriff Corey, nothing at all," Swanson said. "Just a little disagreement between a couple of youngsters is all."

"Disagreement? Is that what you call it when a man strikes a girl for refusing to dance with him?" But for Slim's restraining hand on his arm, Jess would have torn into Swanson for making light of what had happened.

"Tommy, here, was dancing with Cam," Slim told the lawman. "Young Colfax tried to cut in. When she refused to dance with him he got rough. He hit her."

"That's right," Tommy said. "And his friends held me back so I couldn't defend her."

"Pete Colfax. I might have known. I told you to stay out of Laramie a month ago." Corey was a little irritated. He was about to be more so.

"For what reason was my nephew banned from Laramie?" Swanson wanted to know.

"For being a trouble maker, harassing people on the street, starting fights in the saloon and a number of other things," the sheriff replied. "I'm tired of his causing trouble every time he comes to town. I told him to stay out of Laramie or I'd lock him up."

"You're going to lock him up for being high spirited?" Swanson sneered.

"Sheriff Corey just said your nephew is a trouble maker. I sure don't know what his folks are like but you're sure nothing but trouble," Jess told him.

Beside him, Slim tensed. There was bound to be trouble - Swanson was always on Jess' back about something and this, coupled with the coming race, was sure to ignite the fuse.

That trouble was averted - for the time being when Daisy approached.

"Slim! Jess!" Daisy joined them. Cam was surrounded by some of her new friends and their parents.

"I think it's time we went home. The night has been spoiled for poor Cam now."

"Is she all right?" Slim asked in concern.

"She's very upset and she's going to have a sore cheek for a while," the woman told him. "She'll be all right but I think we should take her home now."

Jess was only half listening. He was watching Swanson's every move and he had his eye on young Colfax as well. If the kid were a little older he'd be giving him the same rough treatment he'd given Cam, only it would be Jess' fist doing the damage - not his open hand.

"Jess, go find Mike." Slim saw trouble brewing and was determined to head it off. Cam was distressed enough as it was.

"This ain't over, Swanson." Jess growled. "Your nephew better stay away from Cam or I'll forget he's so much younger than I am."

"Jess! Go find Mike and let's go!" Slim spoke sharply.

"Go on, Jess," Mort told him. "I'll take care of young Colfax."

"Jess, please, go find Mike and let's go home." It was Daisy's turn to quench the sputtering fuse that was Jess Harper's temper at this point.

Reluctantly, Jess went in search of their ward. He really wanted to have it out with Swanson.

"We're going home now, Mort, if that's all right," Slim said. "We had a hard enough time getting Cam to come, for reasons that are personal. Young Colfax, here, has ruined the night for her."

"You go on and take the young lady home," Mort said. "I'll settle with Mr. Colfax and his friends with a little help from Ray and Lon."

Slim went with Daisy to where she'd left Cam with her friends. Between them they got her on her feet and out to the buckboard. Jess came along a few minutes later with a protesting Mike. One look at his new friend's bruised, and tear stained face, and the boy forgot all about being dragged away from his friends. It was a silent, somewhat melancholy, Sherman family that drove the twelve miles back to the ranch.

Once they were home, Daisy applied a cold, damp compress to Cam's aching cheek, gave her some tea to settle her down and then put her to bed as though she were a child Mike's age. The two men put the boy to bed so that Daisy could sit with Cam until she fell asleep.

"Is she all right?" Jess asked when Daisy came back to the main room.

"She cried herself to sleep I'm afraid," was the answer. "She's never been treated the way young Mr. Colfax treated her. Her cheek is going to be sore for a few days. Peter Colfax's hand left quite a bruise." She sat down with her mending basket. "She's going to be boy shy for a while after this, I'm afraid. It's a shame, really, she was just starting to relax and enjoy herself when this happened."

"That Colfax kid is just like his uncle - nothing but trouble," Jess said angrily. "Just when Cam was starting to have fun he shows up and ruins everything. If I was younger, or he was older, he'd be sorry he was ever born."

"I know how you feel, Jess," his partner said, "But there's nothing to be done. Mort's going to take care of things. We'd best stay out of it unless he asks for our help."

A short time later the adults retired. Daybreak came early in the summer and there were chores to do before church.

It was a subdued group that attended the Sunday service that day. Cam's face was still paining her, the adults were concerned and Mike

didn't know if he should say anything or not. After the service was over Cam was surrounded by new friends. The girls clucked over her face while the boys steadfastly swore they'd protect her from any and all troublemakers.

Tommy Everett came to the ranch later that day. He brought a bunch of buttercups, evening stars and other wildflowers he'd picked for her. The two teens sat in the chairs on the front porch talking. Somehow, around Tommy, Cam lost her insecurity and opened up. The two men watched and grinned. Jess poked Slim in the ribs which got a quiet "oof" out of his partner. Mike was kept in the house so he wouldn't embarrass their visitor in the same manner in which he often gave his brothers a hard time.

The two teens sat on the porch talking. The men were kept busy by Daisy, so as to keep them from embarrassing Cam - or themselves. Talk eventually turned to things that were happening in Laramie. It was Tommy who brought up the subject of the upcoming race.

"Did you hear about the big horse race they're going to have?" he asked Cam.

"No. Nobody's said anything." She looked at him with interest. "When is it?"

"A week from this coming Saturday," he told her. "I'm going to ride my Pa's buckskin colt. He's pretty fast. I'm mostly doing it for fun though. Probably won't win but it'll be a fun time anyway."

Eagerly Cam pressed for details.

"Tell me everything!"

For the next thirty minutes the two teens discussed the upcoming race, the rules, the course and entrants. Her eyes lit up when she heard that Jess was planning on racing Galway. Right then and there she decided she was going to be involved in training the young horse. She was sure she would be able to wrap both Jess, and Slim, around her little finger and help. It would be the most fun she would have while visiting Laramie. Little did anyone know just \_how \_involved in the race she would be.

After a while Daisy brought some lemonade and cookies out and everyone sat around enjoying the snack. Shortly thereafter Tommy left for home promising to come back later in the week if he had time.

"So Jess," Cam said with a gleam in her eye, "When were you going to tell us about how you entered Galway in that horse race?"

"Tommy told you?"

"Yes, and I think it's a great idea. I'll help you train him the way Mr. Quinn trained his horses."

"Oh, you will, will you?"

"Yes, I will," she stood ready to argue against any protests he might come up with.

"I don't know about this..." Slim started to protest himself.

"Come on, fellas," Cam argued. "It'll be fun. You work Galway on ranch chores part of the day and then we put him through his paces in a race against Drifter or Rocky or both. It'll be good for both of you and it's what Mr. Quinn would do. He races some of his younger horses just for the fun of it."

In spite of his earlier misgivings Jess was getting caught up in the girl's enthusiasm. He wanted to win that race just for the bragging rights. The money, and trophy, would be a bonus. There were a lot of things they could use that money for such as improvements to the buildings. Maybe a new bull to improve their livestock. Then there was that orphanage, in Brimfield, that needed money for materials, labor and furnishings.

"Ok. Yeah, we'll do it." He hesitated just a second after that and asked, "You sure you know what to do?"

"How could you doubt me?" Cam asked him. "Have I ever lied to you or given you a hard time? Set you up for a practical - or not so practical joke?"

"Well there is the 'wet poodle' remark and the wisecrack about my big head," Jess grinned.

"You're going to hold that against me? Slim, Mrs. Cooper and Sheriff Corey all agreed about the poodle."

Jess leaned down and hugged her. "Ok. When do you want to start?"

"Tomorrow. I'll meet you fellas wherever you're working. Mike can tell me how to get there or bring me."

Plans were made for Cam to meet them in the far north pasture where they could race without fear of rocks or chuckholes. For her part, Cam was very excited. She knew, deep inside, that Galway had a good chance of winning if he was fit enough and she planned to make sure he was.

Daisy's protests were overridden when Jess, and Slim, both promised that if they felt Cam was in any danger they'd stop letting her in on the training sessions. Neither of them felt there was any danger for her and she'd have fun. That was, after all, why she came to visit.

"What about that fishing trip?" Slim suddenly remembered their promise.

"What's wrong with right now?" Cam asked with a grin. "It'll help me feel better."

Her words were a reminder of what had happened to her the night before. Since Tommy's visit she seemed to have perked up. The men dreaded letting her family know what had happened, but they knew they wouldn't keep it from then. However, if a fishing trip would make her happy they were all for it.

They quickly gathered up poles, worms, bread for Cam who insisted it

was better than worms for catching fish and was going to prove it to her friends once and for all - she hoped anyway, and Mike. Daisy packed them a picnic lunch and the four "fishermen" headed for Mike's favorite fishing hole. It would be a rare chance for Daisy to have a day to herself to do something she wanted to do - like catch up on her reading. She had several issues of Godey's Ladies Book to go through and the issues of the Laramie Gazette that Slim had brought back from town over the last week.

When the happy little group arrived at the fishing spot Cam had an idea which would end in defeat for the men.

"How about a little wager fellas? Me and Mike against you two. We use bread for bait - like I always do. You use worms. Loser has to read to the winners every night until I leave."

"That sounds suspiciously like you think you're going to win," Slim said.

"Yeah! What if we win?" Jess wanted to know.

"Same as last time, only Mike will help me make cookies instead of a pie or a cake."

"Gee, I don't know, Cam," Mike said. "I've never made cookies before."

"Don't worry about it Mike," Cam said with a grin. "They don't stand a chance."

"Oh you think so huh?" Jess was the one who reacted first.

"Know so."

"You're on!" Even the normally sensible Slim was unable to keep from rising to the bait. "Come on, Jess, we'll move up stream a little way where the fish are sure to be biting."

When they were gone Cam turned to Mike and said, "Get the loaf of bread out of the picnic basket, and I'll show you just how we're going to win that bet."

The youngster did as she bade him and handed the bread to her. Cam took the loaf and tore a piece off. Then she held it over the water.

"You take a little piece and break it off, Mike. Drop it in the water and watch those trout come charging after that food!"

Mike did as his new friend told him and was pleasantly surprised to find that she knew what she was talking about. Already he was planning what he'd make Slim and Jess read to him.

"You were right, Cam!" he exclaimed. "The fish really like your bread!"

"Yeah. The crumbs tell them that there may be more coming so bait your hook and let's get started. You don't want your brothers to get ahead of us now do you?"

"No!"

Quickly they baited their hooks and dropped them in the water. Just as quickly both of them had good sized trout hooked.

Downstream, the men weren't having such luck. There were usually a lot of fish - trout and bass - along this stretch of the stream but nothing was biting. Nothing worth keeping anyway. They were getting a little nervous that they would lose their bet.

Four hours later it was obvious that Cam and Mike were the winners. The men hadn't been able to catch more than half a dozen between them while the youngsters had caught a dozen apiece. There was more than enough to feed everybody.

The tired fishermen got back to the house around four-thirty that afternoon. Daisy had flour, seasonings and butter all ready for the fish. A large pot of potatoes and another of fresh sweet peas were keeping warm on the stove. Mike, with Cam's help, set the table and brought the cleaned fish in as soon as the men were finished with them. Cam got milk and butter from the spring house while Mike put the sugar, salt and pepper on the table. Then all sat down to a feast of fresh fish followed by blackberry cobbler for dessert.

When Daisy started gathering the dishes, Cam spoke up.

"Leave them be, Mrs. Cooper. I'll help you with them later. It's time," she said with a wicked grin shared by Mike, "For the fellas to start paying off on their bet."

"Thank you, Mike," she said as the boy handed her two thick volumes. She handed one to each of the men. "Slim you get to read Moby Dick. Jess is gonna read from A Thousand And One Nights - tales of Arabia. Scheherezade, Aladdin and His Wonderful Lamp, Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves..."

Daisy started laughing. Jess wasn't as much of a reader as Slim so this would be a real challenge. And it was a bet with a fifteen-year-old girl and a nine-year-old boy, that was forcing him to practice reading out loud.

"'Call me Ishmael'", Slim started Herman Melville's classic story of man versus whale. He read two chapters before it was time for Jess to start.

Jess struggled over some of the names but Cam, having the stories almost all memorized, helped him with them.

After he'd read a couple of those tales it was time for Mike to go to bed. Reluctantly the boy went but only because Cam promised to come in and say good night before he fell asleep. For a youngster who had been very shy of this girl - because he didn't like girls very much - he'd become quite fond of her. He almost wished she could live with them forever.

Bright and early the next morning, Cam was up to her "tricks" of her first morning. She had the fire started, wood box filled, horses fed and watered before Daisy and Slim were up. The cows were milked and fed and the chickens were fed. The eggs were gathered. She even had the table set for breakfast.

Slim opened his mouth to say something but decided not to. If Cam felt like she had to do all this it was better to let her. Otherwise they'd all have to get up two hours earlier to beat her to it. He didn't know what he'd do - what they'd all do when she went home in a few weeks. They were getting spoiled. Far from being a difficult guest the girl had gone out of her way to be useful and still have fun. She spent as much time entertaining Mike as she did helping Daisy with household chores and seeing the ranch. After that difficult time at the dance, she was planning on having fun seeing the area around Laramie with Tommy and some of the other young people.

It was around one o'clock in the afternoon when Cam showed up for Galway's first training session. She'd spent the morning helping Daisy and playing with Mike for a couple of hours. In between then and leaving for the practice field she'd worked out a rough schedule according to what she remembered Mr. Quinn doing with his racers back home in Evergreen. She had a pretty good memory and worked out a reasonable schedule that got Galway accustomed to racing other horses and still putting in a fair amount of ranch work.

"Hi Slim! Hi Jess!" Cam called as she approached their meeting place. "All ready to start training?"

"I guess so." Jess had his doubts that the girl would be able to pull it off. She was just a kid and women didn't usually involve themselves in these things.

"First things first," she said. "I want you to walk him - no jog, no lope - walk him in a quarter mile circle. Say from here to that stand of cottonwoods to that big rock over there and back."

Slim looked at her in surprise. "Walk?"

"Yes, walk," she said. "I want to get a good look at how he's moving. How he walks. If he needs any correction. If he's paying attention to Jess."

"Ok." Slim didn't really understand but he could see that Cam was intently watching the horse and rider.

"Pick it up to a lope for a half circuit, then bring him to a walk - immediately. No delays. He must drop to a walk without jogging."

Jess waved in acknowledgment and did as she told him. Galway responded beautifully.

"Come on in, Jess," the girl called.

When the pair got to her, she dismounted her own mount, Jess' old horse Drifter, and checked Galway over for any signs of lameness.

"You've got him in good shape," she said. "Mr. Quinn would be very happy."

"I work him every day - pretty much," Jess told her. "I still work Drifter some though."



"There's nothing wrong with that. It's good for both of them. Galway gets a break from that serious training and Drifter gets to prove he's still got what it takes."

"Now I want to see how he reacts to racing another horse." Looking around she mapped out a short course in her head. "I want you and Slim, on Galway and Rocky, to line up together here. When I say go I want you to race to that stand of cottonwoods and back again. I also want you to hold him back about halfway through and see if he pays attention or he has to get ahead of Rocky in order to be happy."

She lined the two of them up. In her estimation it was about a quarter of a mile to the stand of cottonwoods.

"Remember, when you get to the cottonwoods, and turn to race back here, I want you to hold Galway back. Try to get him to conserve his energy for the home stretch."

The results of this first day of training pleased both trainer and owner. It was obvious that the girl had watched a professional trainer and learned from him.

Jess had a little trouble getting the colt to hold back but he began to understand why. Quarter Horses were bred for short sprints and tight turns. If he conserved Galway's energy until the last quarter mile of the race they stood a good chance of winning.

For the next couple of days they held strictly private training sessions. Then Cam invited Tommy, and some of the other boys from town, to race with them to see how Galway would react to having a bunch of other horses around him. It didn't go too well at first - the black colt was somewhat used to being the boss of the herd. Now he had competition. Some of the other horses had the same notion and let him know that he was younger and they were the older. Jess had to keep a tight rein on his mount as did the others. Eventually they got it all sorted out.

Only Dan Fulton's paint, Warrior, gave Galway any real competition.

"It's a good thing you're not racing him next Saturday," Slim joked with Dan. "Or I'd be out the twenty dollars I advanced Jess for the entry fee."

"Very funny," Jess grouched as he approached.

Slim laughed at him as did Cam.

"Now Slim," she said trying to stifle her giggles. "That's not nice."

The tired, dusty group took drinks from their canteens. There was a small stream nearby where they watered the horses after cooling them out. It was getting late and everyone had chores to do at home. The last stage out of Laramie, headed for Cheyenne, would be coming in soon and Slim and Jess needed to be back at the house before it arrived.

"Thanks for coming, boys," Slim said.

"See ya later," Jess waved as the teens headed for home.

"Two o'clock tomorrow," Cam reminded them as she turned Drifter toward the home range.

It was a tired, dusty trio that arrived back at the barnyard an hour and a half later. Slim took one look at Cam's face and sent her into the house. She looked a little flushed to him. Definitely she was tired. Better to send her into the house to relax and let Daisy get a look at her.

The stage team changed, all the animals tended to and the evening milking done, the two men headed into the house. Cam was nowhere in sight.

"Daisy? Where's Cam?" Slim was concerned.

"In bed. She's coming down with a cold, poor dear."

"She gonna be okay?" Jess asked anxiously. "Is there anything we can do?"

"No, dear. She's just overtired and running a very low fever. A couple of days of rest and herbal teas and she'll be all right."

"You're sure?" Slim asked.

"Yes, I'm sure. She's been trying to do too much and didn't pay attention to the sore throat." The woman of the house reassured her them.

"Can we look in on her?" the rancher asked.

"Maybe later," Daisy told him. "I want her to rest a little while before dinner. You can bring her supper tray in to her after we eat."

Dinner that night was beef stew with plenty of potato chunks and carrot slices. There was fresh bread and butter and spice cake for dessert. When they had finished Daisy fixed a tray with a cup of beef broth and some chamomile tea. Jess carried it in to Cam and sat with her while she drank both. Then he took the tray out to the kitchen and Slim went in to check on her. He was there fifteen minutes before Daisy came in and shooed him out. The matronly woman made the girl slide down under the covers and go to sleep.

Cam was sick for three days. During that whole time she fretted about Galway's training. Slim took over as trainer using Cam's schedule and things went well.

Up on a high bluff, overlooking their latest training area, two men watched as Galway ran away with every practice race he ran. Neither Slim, nor Jess, noticed the sunlight flashing off the binoculars; they were so intent on timing Galway and watching him race Warrior and the other horses that Cam's new friends brought to the training sessions.

To practice the sharp turns they had the young people turn their

horses loose. Jess would then use Galway to cut them out of the bunch, one by one, and change directions. Galway was responding beautifully. Chasing the other horses was good practice for the turns they would have to make and good training for turning him into a cow pony. Even better was that the colt was having a lot of fun. He'd chase the horses and get praise from Jess and the other humans. There was the added benefit of the extra carrots and apples he got when he performed well.

"The boss isn't gonna be happy when we tell him that Harper's colt is a black thunderbolt." James Britt put the binoculars down and looked at Pat Downing.

"Yeah, you can say that again."

Downing took the binoculars from Britt and studied the scene below. Galway had just put in another good time on a one mile track. The man shook his head.

"Sure gonna be hard to beat that colt," he told his companion. "The boss is gonna have to do something - maybe try and buy that colt from Harper. None of the other entries are nearly as good."

"Nope. And none of them takes the turns as fast or covers that last quarter mile as fast either."

"They've got that colt changing position real fast too. Boss ain't gonna like what we got to tell him."

The two men rose and slunk back down the other side of the hill to their waiting horses. Mounting quickly they rode back to Laramie as fast as they could go. Leaving their horses tied in front of the saloon they made their way down the street to Swanson's freight company. They made a point of entering the business through the back door so they wouldn't be seen after ensuring that nobody saw them enter the alley.

Swanson was sitting at his desk in the office. A lighted cigar sat in an ash tray on his right while he used a pencil to follow a column of figures that ran the length of a page in a ledger. He barely acknowledged his employees as they settled themselves in chairs on the other side of his desk.

Finally finished, he looked up expectantly.

"Well, what did you find out?"

The two men looked at each other somewhat nervously.

Britt cleared his throat and then answered.

"That colt of Harper's is fast. Real fast. Maybe even faster than your Connemara."

Swanson looked at Downing questioningly.

"Yeah, Britt's right. That colt is faster than most anything I've seen for a while."

"Something's got to be done about it then." Swanson frowned. "Maybe I

can get Harper to sell that colt to me."

"I doubt it boss." Britt shook his head. "I hear he's real fond of that colt. Sherman bought it for him a year ago when the horse he was riding broke its leg about four day's ride from here."

"You never know until you try," Swanson said. "If he won't sell I'll think of something else. "

Back at his office he found two of his other so-called drivers hanging around. Myron Gage and Walt McAleer had reputations as card sharps and brawlers. Nobody understood what they were doing working for a supposedly legitimate businessman.

"Gage. McAleer. In my office - \_now\_."

The two men looked at each other and then went into the room. Once inside they stood in front of Swanson's desk expectantly.

"Harper don't frighten easy," Downing said. "How far do you want us to go?"

"Find out where they're training that colt. Start a fire, A rock slide. Throw a few shots close enough to scare the colt into running away. I don't care." Swanson was furious. "Just one thing - they've got a girl staying with them - the one my nephew wanted to dance with last week. Be careful not to endanger her or Sheriff Corey will be breathing down my neck right away."

"Got ya." McAleer told his boss. "Somebody in this town is gonna know where they're going to be training next. I hear they've been some place different every day."

Ten teenage boys, Tommy Everett and Dan Fulton among them, met the Sherman party in the high meadow they'd decided to gather in. All the boys, and their horses, looked fresh and ready for action. However, serious training, so close to race day, wasn't what Cam had on her mind.

"Look, everyone, the race is only a few days away. We've been training Galway - and his rider," she said with a twinkle in her eye, "For a week and a half. It's time to have some fun."

"Now wait a minute," Slim started to protest. "If all we're gonna do is play games then Jess and I are leaving - we have work to do."

"Quit your complaining," Cam told him. "It's still training but it's fun at the same time and we can see how much he's learned."

She looked at the group assembled and said, "Everybody gather 'round. It's time for some fun and games. I think we'll start with tag. I'm 'It' so scatter before I catch you. I'll give 'til the count of ten."

So saying she started counting while the rest of the group scattered around the meadow, The first rider she went after was Slim who was a little too slow in reacting and found himself tagged before he could react. Cam had no such problem She tagged him on the way by leaving him to scramble to find his first "victim" which happened to be Tommy

who tagged Dan who tagged Mark Dennison who went after Jess who wheeled Galway away causing Mark to miss him. Mark was able to tag Steve King who snuck up on Jess and tagged him. Jess went after Cam but missed. It seemed that Cam was very well versed in tag - on horseback or not. He changed tactics and went after his partner but this time Slim managed to avoid the tag which caused everyone to laugh at the frustrated look on Jess' face. Failing to catch up with Slim, Jess went after Dan who also managed to avoid the tag. The dark haired cowboy's next attempt, which was to tag Tommy, was successful.

Everyone was having a great time and Cam could see that the training sessions had increased Galway's responsiveness and maneuverability. He was showing his Quarter Horse breeding in the tight turns and the endurance of his Morgan ancestors. She was certain he was ready for the big race. The games would give him a chance to relax and not get bored, or frustrated, the way regular training sessions would.

They stopped for a rest period after half an hour of this. Cam had made sandwiches for herself, Slim and Jess and there was a small pond of cold, clean water that they could get water from. The other participants in the training sessions had also brought lunches with them. They all cooled their sweaty horses off and took them down for a drink.

"Those rocks look like a good place to sit while we eat," Dan said pointing to the rocks at the bottom of the cliff on the eastern side of the field where they were playing.

After a quick check for any rattlesnakes that might be sunning themselves there, Slim and Jess agreed and the group made themselves comfortable while the horses grazed. All had had the foresight to bring halters and picket lines. While Slim's Rocky might not stray once he was ground hitched, only Tommy's horse was trained that way. Drifter, too, they had no worries about. Most of the others were just ridden for pleasure or to and from school and other such things.

Everyone was more than ready to eat. They'd had fun but it was hard work too, trying to catch their companions. Cam, Tommy, Dan and Mark, as well as Jess took seats on some relatively flat rocks at the base of the cliff. Slim, and some of the other boys, climbed further up wanting a better view of the area. Slim also wanted to keep an eye on the horses from a higher vantage point. From his position, roughly halfway up the slope, he could see pretty much the whole two acre site. With the exception of Jess, who was too busy eating to talk, they chatted their way through lunch. It was Tommy Everett who first noted the rumbling of what would seem to be thunder.

"Is that thunder I hear?" he asked.

"Can't be," Dan replied looking up at the sky. "There's not a cloud in sight."

"I hear something though," Tommy insisted.

Jess was the one to spot the rock slide that was headed straight for where they were all sitting. His eyes widened at the sight.

"Rock slide! Get away from the cliff!" He grabbed Cam by the hand and

pulled her onto her feet. Pushing her toward Tommy he turned back to make sure the other teens, and Slim, were heeding the warning. He saw Dan and Mark were halfway across the field and grabbing the bridles of the spooked horses. Drifter, Rocky and Warrior were already on the far side where they would be safe. They were spooked but too well trained just to run off.

Cam grabbed Galway's bridle and started across the field with the nervous colt. Tommy was right behind her and Dan met her halfway across to help her with the frightened horse.

Turning back, she grabbed the halter of one of the other horses and started for the safety of the far side of the field. Horrified she saw a shower of dirt, and small rocks, being pushed down the side of the hill. One of the boys had fallen and lay right in its path. Seeing this, Slim had stopped to help the teen to his feet. They were almost at the bottom, and on the level ground where they could run when a rock bounced up and hit Slim in the side of the head.

The tall rancher went down like a felled tree right in the path of the slide. A good sized boulder was only a few yards away from the fallen man.

"Slim!" Cam screamed.

Hearing her, Jess turned back and saw his partner lying dazed on the ground. With a burst of speed he didn't know he was capable of, the dark haired cowboy raced to his friend's side and pulled him to his feet. Putting Slim's left arm around his neck and his right arm around Slim's waist, Jess started across the field to join the others. Seeing that both men were still in danger, Tommy and Dan raced to help Jess and Slim. They were only five feet away when the boulder smashed into the spot where Sherman had so recently lay,

Cam was crying, and the other boys shaken, when Jess and the two teenagers got Slim to where they were waiting.

"Put him down here," the girl told them indicating the place where a tall pine tree stood. "Sit him up against that tree." She took her canteen from Drifter's saddle and used it to clean the blood off of Slim's face where it trickled down from the place where the rock had hit him.

"Is he gonna be all right?" Jess asked anxiously. Although he knew head wounds tended to bleed a lot it still scared him to see his partner hurt like that.

"I think so," Cam told him. "It looks like the rock just hit him a glancing blow.

As they spoke Slim's eyes fluttered open. Dazedly he looked around before focusing on Jess and grinning.

"Hi pard."

"Hi yourself. How do you feel?"

"Like I got kicked by a mule."

Everybody grinned and chuckled in relief. If Slim could make jokes

like that he was fine.

"Be serious now, Slim," Cam admonished him. "How's your head? Are you dizzy? Nauseous? Seeing double."

"I'm fine."

She and Jess exchanged looks. She'd know Slim for ten years so she knew he'd try to make light of the situation. Jess had only known him for three but he was well aware that Slim would try to make his injuries out to be nothing.

"Sure you are," Jess said with a grin. " That rock just bounced off your head instead of denting it. That's why I call you Hard Rock."

Cam giggled when she heard that. She'd heard her aunt, and uncle, often say that Slim had a hard head. Now here was Jess giving him a suitable nickname.

High up at the top of the cliff, where the rock slide had started, two men cursed their luck at not putting Jess out of the race. Both he and that blasted black thunderbolt were unharmed. The only good thing was that nobody had seen them. Stealthily they made their way back to their horses and went into town to report their failure to their boss.

Jess helped Slim to his feet and the group decided to call it quits for the day and head home promising themselves, and each other, to make light of the incident. A rock slide was a rock slide. They could happen any time. There had been heavy rain up here a few nights ago. It was quite likely that some of the loose rock had shifted and fallen completely on its own. As they started to gather their horses Jess looked back. He didn't say anything but he was suspicious about the timing of the rock slide. Why now? Why not yesterday or tomorrow or some other day. A day when no one was around to be in harm's way.

Only one person - maybe two - was not convinced but he wasn't saying anything. He didn't want to alarm Cam and they really needed to get Slim home and properly taken care of. Cam may have been able to clean him up but it would be a good idea for Daisy to have a look and to get Slim into bed early. Some peppermint tea would go a long way toward easing the headache he would have.

"Let's plan on meeting tomorrow afternoon - around two?" Cam suggested. "Where do you think we should meet?"

"I think it would be good to meet in Dan's father's high meadow," Tommy suggested. "It's not far from here and it might be good for all the horses to see something different. There's plenty of grass for them and a nice little stream running through it."

"Is that okay by your father, Dan?" Jess asked. "Providing of course old Hard Rock here is up to joining us."

Slim glared at him. "I'm fine. I already told you that."

"Sure. Pa's not running any stock up there right now - they're all up on the high range. He won't bring them down until fall. He likes to

let that grass grow high and cut it for hay come August."

The group parted ways then. Jess, Slim and Cam headed back for the relay station and a good hot meal - and to have Daisy check Slim over.

When the relay station crew got home Slim was banished from the barn to go into the house. Jess, and Cam, with a little help from Mike, unsaddled and made the three horses comfortable in their stalls. Then they fed, and watered them and went in for dinner.

Slim was laying on the couch under the window in the front of the house when they returned from the barn. It was his sole concession to Daisy's ministrations other than a small bandage on his head and a cup of herbal tea for his headache. He was a little pale, but his friends figured the headache he must have would account for that.

They all did justice to Daisy's meal of pork chops, baked potatoes, fresh beets from their garden, fresh bread and butter with apple pie for dessert.

"My favorite pie!" Jess exclaimed.

Cam started giggling. "As far as I can tell, Mrs. Cooper, \_any \_pie is Jess' favorite."

Daisy laughed. "I do believe you're right, dear. He says the same thing whether it's gooseberry, strawberry, mixed berry or any other kind of pie. I have yet to find one he \_doesn't \_like."

Jess just grinned while the others laughed.

It wasn't long after dinner that the men, and Cam, turned in. Between ranch work and the training sessions, they'd put in a long day. Then there was the trauma of the rock slide which everyone played down as just dumb luck.

The training session began at two in the afternoon, just as they planned. They played tag, ran a few races for the fun of it. Cam had Jess work on Galway's willingness to wait and use his inborn talent for speed in short bursts to beat out half the boys in the last quarter mile of their races. In spite of their best efforts some of the boys were unable to get their mounts to hold back. They wanted to run and that was all there was to it. They thought it was fun and would buck, sidle and otherwise complain when held back.

"They're like a bunch of little kids," Slim commented with a grin. "Those boys are gonna have to work on that or they're going to have trouble."

Since they were starting so late, that Wednesday before the race, the session was kept short. Slim and Jess had to be back at the ranch to handle the incoming stages and Cam had promised Daisy she'd do some mending and darning for her. The girl continued to pitch in wherever, and whenever, she could.

In Laramie, Dave Swanson was fretting. None of his plans were working out. His freighting business was suffering due to his obsession with horse racing. He'd lost a lot of money in poker over the last couple



of nights and Harper's colt was still going to race. There had to be something else they could do that would make the man drop out of the race.

"We've got a little surprise for them, boss," Britt told his employer. We're going to pay the Sherman place a little visit tonight - after they're all asleep. Either we get that colt off the place and lose him in the hills somewhere or we'll set the barn on fire."

"I don't care how you do it - just get rid of that colt. Storm Cloud has to win on Saturday. From what you've told me, Harper - and his young friends - have got that colt running better than Cloud ever has." He scowled as he lit a fresh cigar. "I haven't got time to look for another horse. It's Cloud or nothing and I'm not going to lose."

"Don't worry about it," Downing said. "One way or another Harper's colt isn't going to be in that race on Saturday."

The lights in both the main house and the bunk house, had been out for about thirty minutes or so, when two shadowy figures made their way across the yard into the barn yard. One of them stumbled and let out a soft curse when he bumped into a fence post.

"Shut up, you fool! You'll wake somebody up."

As the two intruders made their way to the corral by the barn, the horses in their small corral, fretted nervously, when the strangers let themselves into their enclosure. Galway was rope shy and gave them a hard time. After a couple of tries to get a rope on him, he wouldn't let them get close. Rocky and Drifter, as well as some of the other horses started setting up a racket.

Eventually the strangers managed to get a rope on the black colt. They took too long. The horses started running around the enclosure. Galway fought the rough treatment he was getting and charged at the men.

Slim stirred in his sleep. Something was wrong but he didn't know what for a minute. Half asleep he got out of bed and went to the window. He was awake in an instant once he saw what was going on.

"Jess! Wake up! Somebody's in the corral with the horses!"

"Huh?" Jess was always slow to wake up at home.

"Jess! Horse thieves!" Slim yelled as he rushed out the door in his long johns, and pants.

Barefooted and carrying his gun belt, which had been hung over his bed post while he and Jess were sleeping in the bunk house, he ran for the door. A now wide awake Jess, also clad in long johns and pants and barefoot, followed with his gun already out of its holster.

"Who's out there?" Slim called.

Lights now appeared in the house as the noise from the corral, and Slim's shout, roused Daisy and Cam. Mike slept on until Buttons

started barking.

"Buttons! Hush!" Cam scolded the dog.

"What's going on?" a sleepy little boy asked.

"I'm not sure. Can you see what's got Buttons so upset Mrs. Cooper?" Cam asked Daisy.

"No, I can't," Daisy replied, "But the boys are out there. Whatever's going on must have woken them up like it did us."

Buttons scratched at the door eager to get outside. Jess would have been surprised as his sole experience with Buttons as a guard dog was when the dog hid himself until the trouble was over. Slim, however, had been alerted to rustlers by the dog's insistent barking. Mike started toward the door but Cam was too fast for him.

"Just where do you think \_you're \_going?"

"I want to make sure Giant is okay."

"You stay right here with me and Mrs. Cooper until Slim and Jess tell us it's safe to go outside," the girl told him.

"Cam's right," Daisy told the boy. "It's dangerous and you might distract Slim and Jess and get them hurt - if you don't get hurt yourself."

A shot fired at Slim whistled past his head and lodged in the fence post behind him. Both men returned fire once. The horses, spooked by the shooting, started milling around. The intruders, on the far side of the corral, took the opportunity to escape before Jess and Slim could extricate themselves from the frightened animals.

The two of them spent a few minutes calming the bunch. It was then that they discovered the rope around Galway's neck. Jess was seething.

"They were after Galway." he said.

"Yeah, but they might have been after the others as well," Slim replied. "We can't know for sure that it was only him they were after."

"Slim!" Jess was outraged.

"I know, I know," Slim said patiently. "They \_could \_have been after Galway. Tell you what. Let's put him, Rocky and Drifter in the barn. They'll be harder to get at."

"All right, but I'm sleeping in the barn with them until the race is over."

"That's up to you. Right now we'd better let the others know that everything's all right."

Daisy was waiting for them when they got to the door.

"What happened? Are you all right?"

"Everything's fine, Daisy," Slim assured her with an arm around her shoulders. "Some thieves tried to run off with the horses. We scared them off."

"Is..." Cam started to ask.

"Galway's fine," the tall blond rancher assured her. He knew she was just about as attached to the colt as Jess was. She'd been there when Galway was born and watched him grow from gangly newborn to the handsome animal he was now.

"He's gonna be moved into the barn," Jess said. "And I'm gonna sleep out there until this race is over."

"You think it's got something to do with the race?" the girl asked.

"We don't know that for sure," Sherman answered. "Jess is just being overly cautious. We're moving Rocky and Drifter into the barn as well."

Daisy looked at them skeptically but chose not to press the issue since Mike was standing right there.

"Come on, Mike," Cam said. "I'll tuck you in. Say good night to Slim and Jess now."

"Night."

"Good night, Tiger," the men responded.

"We'll see you in the morning," Jess told him.

Daisy turned to the chest by the door and, opening it, removed a couple of extra blankets. It may have been summer but she wasn't going to let her two oldest sleep in the barn without enough comfort and defense against the elements.

"Thanks Daisy," Jess said as he took them and kissed her cheek.

The men left for the corral and the barn. Daisy went back to bed and Cam was right behind her having tucked Mike in for the night and told him a quick story from Andersen's fairy tales. The little boy fell fast asleep as soon as she finished.

Cam wasn't long in falling asleep again herself. Despite the excitement of a few minutes ago, she'd put in a long day and was pretty tired. Daisy was already asleep.

Morning came early on the ranch and she needed to be up and have coffee on before breakfast. Jess was an absolute bear until he'd had at least two cups of coffee before breakfast.

The sun wasn't even up yet when Cam walked into the barn. First she scattered grain for the chickens. Then she milked the cows while the chickens were eating. Going back to the house she roused Mike from his bed and set him to work gathering the eggs while she started cleaning the stalls. Together the two of them fed and watered the horses. They brought firewood into the house and filled the wood box

and a basket with chips, splinters and shavings for kindling.

Cam started a fire in the stove and got the coffee on while Mike set the table. By the time Daisy came out into the kitchen the youngest members of the household had sliced bacon, sliced bread, placed the butter and jam on the table and laid the sliced bread on a baking sheet to put in the oven to be toasted.

"My goodness!" the woman exclaimed. "You two have certainly been busy. Tell me, Cam, how did you manage to get Mike out of bed so early."

"She pulled the covers off of me and told me to get up and help her," Mike said. "We fed the chickens and gathered the eggs, and milked the cows and brought firewood and kindling in." He paused to take a breath. "And we cleaned the stalls and I set the table and we sliced the bread and the bacon and put the pans on to get hot."

"And we didn't wake Slim and Jess up," Cam grinned. "The smell of coffee ought to wake both of them up. If not the bacon and eggs will."

"You're right about that," Daisy chuckled. "Jess absolutely cannot function until he gets coffee into him in the morning and Slim's almost as bad some days."

No sooner were those words out of their mouths than the men straggled in from the barn looking half asleep.

"Well will you look what the cat dragged in," Cam joked as they made their way to the table. "Mrs. Cooper have you ever seen two such useless men in your life? Why Mike and I got more work done in the last hour than these two have done since they got up."

Daisy chuckled and poured coffee for the men while Cam poured milk for herself and Mike.

"When does she go home Slim?" Jess asked grouchily.

"Not for another week," Slim answered just as sourly.

"You sure we can't send her back early?"

"Nope. We promised the folks we'd keep her for a month."

"Now you two stop that," Daisy scolded them. "You know you're going to miss her when she goes home. She's a good girl and a good guest."

"She's looking for a spanking if she keeps it up," Jess threatened.

"Yeah?" Cam laughed at him.

"Yeah." he said.

Cam and Mike giggled. They were having a lot of fun teasing the men. Especially since they weren't awake yet and Cam was all over them. Slim should have known better. Having grown up with her cousins - to a certain extent - he knew what the girl's sense of humor was like.

She was much like the cousin he claimed was such a bad influence on her. The same cousin that she'd heard he used to get into mischief with when he was a boy.

The talk stopped, briefly, as the food was passed around. As usual Jess ate twice as much as Slim causing the older man to shake his head.

"Where do you put it all?" Slim asked. "You eat enough for ten men and never gain an ounce that I can see."

Jess ignored the jibe and kept eating until he was finally finished. Nobody was silly enough to try and reach for the last biscuit on the plate. It went without saying that it belonged to Jess unless Daisy had some in reserve.

Once the dishes were cleared, and washed, Cam set out for the barn to get Drifter. She was getting good at riding the patient gelding and loved taking care of him. She never interfered with Jess' care of Galway because it was important that the two become partners the same as Jess and Drifter had been for so many years and would remain so as long as they both lived. Drifter was her responsibility while she was staying at the ranch.

Tying him to a fence post at the corral, the teen gave Drifter a good grooming and then saddled him. She'd promised Mike she would take him for a ride before she went to meet up with the group for a last training session. She wanted Galway to have a couple of days of regular work and/or relaxation before the big race which was only three days away.

Mid morning Swanson drove into the Sherman barnyard in his buggy. Dressed in the same clothes he usually wore - black pants and coat, white shirt and gold brocade vest with a black string tie - he exuded confidence in himself and his intent. He was going to buy Harper's black colt and eliminate the only real competition his Connemara faced.

Cam and Mike had just gotten back from their ride and were dismounting at the corral when he stopped his rig.

"Good morning," he said in a cheerful voice. "Would Mr. Harper be around?"

"He's in the house I think," Cam answered. "Mike, go tell Jess he's got a visitor okay?"

The boy looked at her and at Swanson before going in much quieter than usual. He didn't like this man but he didn't know why. He could sense that Cam felt the same way and she sure didn't know him. Cam tied Drifter to a rail on the corral and walked up to the house where she took a seat on the porch. The visitor followed, stopping just shy of the porch.

Jess came out of the house a minute later clad in his usual working gear of faded denims and shirt plus boots and spurs minus chaps which he would put on when he got ready to go out on the range. Mike had apparently been told to stay inside - or else Daisy had corralled him into helping her with the dishes. Possibly both. Cam didn't budge from her seat and ignored Jess' hint that she, too, should go

inside.

"Swanson," he greeted the man. "What brings you out here?"

"Business."

"What kind of business could you have with me? I don't have need of your services and neither does the ranch or the stage line."

"Oh, no my dear boy," Swanson said in a hearty tone. "My business is of a personal nature. I'm here to buy your black colt - Galway I believe you call him."

"He ain't for sale," the Texan responded.

"Everything's for sale at the right price."

"Not that colt."

"Seems to me it's not your say," Swanson stated firmly. "The colt rightly belongs to the ranch. Perhaps I should talk to Mr. Sherman."

"I'm right here and my answer is the same as Jess'," came Slim's voice from the doorway where he stood listening to the conversation."

"I'll pay you a good price. How does two hundred dollars sound?"

"Nope."

"Two fifty."

"Why are you so anxious to buy that colt, Swanson?" Jess was curious. "He's just green broke. I'm training him to be a cowpony. No average cowpony is worth that much money."

"Jess is right," Slim agreed with a frown on his face. "I bought that colt for him to replace a horse we had to put down on the way home from Colorado. He's just a cow pony - part Quarter Horse, part Morgan. He's not some fancy, Eastern raised Thoroughbred."

"I like his looks. I think he'd be a good addition to my stable. A good riding horse."

"I'll bet," Jess said skeptically. "It wouldn't be a couple of your employees who tried to steal him last night would it?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Two men tried to steal that colt last night."

"So somebody tried to steal the colt. He's a good looking animal. Maybe some drifting cowboy saw him and decided to swap."

"Nope. Nobody tried to swap," Jess told him. "They ran off when we confronted them. We heard their horses about a quarter of a mile away."

Slim decided to end the conversation before it turned into a brawl.

"Like I said, Swanson," the tall rancher spoke again. "The colt belongs to Jess. If he doesn't want to sell he doesn't have to. Now get in your rig and get off my property."

"You'll regret it. I'm willing to pay whatever you ask."

"He's not for sale! Now get out of here!" Jess was ready to haul off and punch the man but, with Cam sitting there watching, he restrained himself.

The three of them watched as Swanson got into his rig and headed west, back toward Laramie. Cam, scowled as she watched him leave.

"I don't like that man."

"Neither do we," Slim told her.

"He's up to something."

"Now, Cam, we can't prove anything. Just forget about him. Now that Daisy's willing to let you out of the house - and out of her sight again - let's just concentrate on Galway's training."

She rose from the chair she was in and ducked inside to get her jacket. She hadn't needed one when she and Mike had gone riding but it was apt to be a bit cooler where they were going to practice in the higher elevations. She wasn't going to take a chance on getting a chill. Daisy would have her confined to the house if she thought Cam was getting sick again.

"Well I think it would be a good idea to watch out for him," the girl said. "He's awfully determined to buy Galway. Maybe he's not so sure his horse will win."

"Just you let \_us \_worry about that," the tall man said. "You worry about getting the Sherman Ranch and Relay Station ready to compete."

Swanson fumed all the way back to Laramie. He wanted that horse of Harper's out of the race. When he'd refused to sell he'd tried to get it through Sherman to no avail. The freight line operator had been sure that Slim, as a fellow businessman, would see that there was a decent profit to make by selling that colt.

However, Sherman had proved to be every bit as stubborn as he was reputed to be. He wouldn't undercut Harper by selling the colt without that saddle tramp's consent. Well, there was more than one way to skin a cat. That black thunderbolt was not going to cost him the prize money and the trophy.

"So what's the plan for today?" Jess asked as they approached their training ground for the day.

"It's round up time," she grinned.

"Huh?"

"Galway's going to have some fun doing what you're training him to do - rounding up strays. The boys are going to make it as hard on you as they can," she explained. "You'll be teaching him round up skills and also preparing him to change directions and be ready to change positions in the race if you get boxed in."

He gave her a skeptical look.

"Look, I've watched you, Slim and other cowboys working with the cattle and with wandering horses. A good cowpony, from what I've observed needs to be nimble, obedient and fast - ready to change direction instantly. The boys are going to act like a bunch of rebellious cattle, or horses, and you have to chase them down."

As Jess started out to the middle of the field, Cam added, "And after a few tries of catching them \_and \_their horses we're going to turn the horses loose for you two to chase."

A few miles away two men watched this exercise. Sunlight flashed off the lenses catching Cam's eye who mentioned it to Slim. Sherman rode about a mile out in the direction of the flashes but saw nothing. The two men had taken cover in the trees, dismounted and were keeping their horses quiet.

Shrugging, Slim rode back to the field and joined in the round up. He and Rocky were not at their best, Jess had Galway so well trained, thanks to Cam's plan, that they stood no chance of escaping. More than once he had to pull up short.

"Lunch, everybody," Cam yelled around eleven-thirty.

The "cattle" and the cowboy chasing them responded with delighted yells.

They rode over to the side of the field and got comfortable in the shade. All took out sandwiches and drinks from the bottles of lemonade that Daisy had sent along in the Sherman riders' saddlebags. After they finished they all lay back to take a brief nap. Cam was surrounded by protectors. No insect, snake or anything else was going to disturb the visitor to Laramie if the men could help it. Men - and teenage boys who were fast becoming best friends with the girl from Evergreen.

While the group dozed, the two men who were watching them quietly made their way over to where the horses were tethered. Warrior spooked even before Drifter and Rocky. That got the other horses upset and they all started milling around.

Jess noticed and nudged a drowsy Slim.

"Hey Slim, something's bothering the horses. Maybe we got an unwelcome visitor down there."

"Mountain lion maybe?" Slim was wide awake now.

"Maybe. We better check it out."

"What's the matter?" Tommy was wide awake now. The men's voices had roused him.



"We're not sure," Slim told him. "Something's got the horses upset. Jess and I are going down to check it out. You kids stay here."

"All right," Tommy said. "Be careful."

Cautiously the two men made their way from the group over toward the horses. They were almost there when the reason for the animals' uneasiness was discovered. Two masked men charged the ranchers and took off running for their own horses. Slim and Jess were quickly on their feet again. Slim brought one of them to the ground by tackling him but a well placed blow to the right temple dazed him and took him out of the fight. Jess, seeing his partner down and not moving, gave up the chase. The boys, and Cam, seeing that the danger was past, ran to their friends. Slim was sitting up shaking his head groggily while Jess knelt beside him.

"What in the world is going on?" Cam asked. "First a rock slide, then somebody tries to steal horses last night and now this."

"I don't know," Slim said. "Not for sure."

"Well I do," Jess said. "Swanson's afraid of losing the race so he's doing everything he can to see that me and Galway don't race."

"We've got no proof of that," his partner said, "But I'm inclined to agree with you."

"What more do you need to know?" Jess asked. "First the rock slide, then the attempt to steal Galway, then Swanson shows up wanting to buy him and now this!"

"Now what?" Cam attempted to be a voice of reason. "Nothing happened. Two men saw the horses and got curious? Wanted to know what we were doing?"

"Hah!" Jess scoffed.

"Circumstantial evidence. We can't go to Mort without real proof."

"You could at least talk to Mr. Corey," Cam told them. "Maybe he can't do anything but at least he'd know something strange is going on."

"You've got no proof, Jess," Mort Corey tried to explain his position.

"What more do you need? Someone's tried to steal Galway twice. There was a rock slide. Now Swanson shows up - out of the blue - and wants to buy him?" Jess was furious. "Ain't that proof enough?"

"No, it's not," the sheriff told him.

"Why not?"

"Because you don't have any real evidence tying him to those other incidents."

"I think what Mr. Corey's trying to say, Jess," Cam said, "Is that you need witnesses to testify that he's responsible or you need to catch him in the act of ordering these things done."

"That's exactly right, little lady," Mort said. "Unless you can find someone who will swear that Swanson is responsible - or catch him in the act of doing something, or ordering something done, I can't do a thing."

"I'll get your proof," Jess growled and stomped toward the door.

"Jess!" Mort spoke sharply.

The ex-gunfighter stopped up short. Mort was one of the few men who had that effect on him. When Mort spoke like that Jess usually listened.

"Jess, I know what you're thinking and I suspect I know what you want to do," Slim said patiently, "But you can't go accusing the man..."

"Or threatening him," Cam added.

"Or threatening him," Slim agreed. "The case against him would be thrown right out of court."

"And you could wind up in jail and really spoil my visit," the girl told him.

"That too," Slim agreed.

Jess scowled. Even the kids, all of whom had accompanied him and Slim to Mort's office, were against him pressing charges.

"Go home." Mort told them. "If you come up with proof that I can use to make criminal charges stick I'll be happy to arrest him. But don't forget that Swanson is an important man - in his mind at least - in this town. I have to tread lightly or there will be a lot of trouble."

A sullen Jess left Corey's office with his partner, their guest and the rest of the teens. The well liked sheriff shook his head. He had no more use for Dave Swanson, or his nephew, than anybody else but his hands were tied. He couldn't arrest the man without proof and there wasn't any proof tying him to the incidents that seemed to be deliberate attempts to get Jess and Galway out of the race.

Outside the sheriff's office, Slim, Jess and the rest of their group mounted their horses and headed for their individual homes. By twos and threes, the teens headed off promising to come by Slim's place to take Cam and Mike riding. She'd already told them that there would be no more training sessions. She wanted Galway to be rested and eager. If he got bored he wouldn't run well on Saturday.

Thursday was a hot and humid day. Cam and Mike went up to the waterhole located about a mile from the house to go wading. The men rode around the whole ranch checking fences, water holes and herds. It was almost supper time when they got back. They were hot, sweaty and tired. Cam took one look at them and recruited Mike to take care

of their horses. Daisy brought them some lemonade and towels so they could take showers and dress in clean clothes before coming in for supper.

It was two very tired men who pulled their chairs up to the table that night. Both were showing some sunburn under their tans - especially the fair haired Slim. Lines of fatigue spread across their faces and their blue eyes were dull. Jess was almost too tired to eat. He picked at his food but ate very little. Slim was almost as bad. The fact that he didn't rib Jess about his lack of appetite was a clear indication that he was too tired to bother.

It wasn't long after the table was cleared that the Slim and Jess headed out to make a last check on the livestock. The horses checked on Jess and Slim, headed for the barn. Slim had decided to sleep in the barn as much to appease Jess as to keep an eye on their three saddle horses. Cam took it upon herself to make sure that all doors, gates and pens were closed and secure before she went to bed. Mike, worn out by the heat and a long day of activity, went to sleep after one story from Daisy. He may have been going on ten but he still needed the story as a part of the feelings of security from love of family.

Cam helped Daisy get some things ready for breakfast and then they both retired as well. It was a hot night and nobody was sleeping well except the two exhausted men in the barn. Mike fretted in his sleep, tossing and turning. Cam rose quietly so as not to disturb her roommate, and donned a light green robe over her nightgown. Silently she made her way to the little boy's room and sat with him until he fell asleep again.

On her way back to her bed she detoured to the kitchen to get a glass of water and splash some cold water on her face. She let the clear, cold water run over her wrists as well. It was something her aunt and uncle had taught her. Running cold water over the wrist could help calm the pulse that made one hot. Some nights it worked. Some nights it didn't. This was one of the latter. Restlessly she decided to sit on the porch for a few minutes. Maybe a little fresh air would help she thought.

As quietly as she could, she opened the front door and slipped out onto the porch. Turning to her left, she felt around for one of the chairs and made herself comfortable. The wind was rising and there was a faint smell of rain in the air. Heat lightning flickered in the distance. The horses in the corral moved restlessly, maybe even nervously. The teen figured they were as hot and uncomfortable as everyone, and everything, else was.

She sat there for about fifteen minutes before she started feeling the least little bit drowsy and then just didn't feel like getting up. A horse's nervous stomping and the faint growling from Buttons, who was sleeping under the porch, roused her.

"Buttons! Quiet! You'll wake everybody up," the girl scolded.

The dog subsided for a minute but was soon growling again. The horses became more restive and the teen got suspicious. She cat footed it across the porch to the barn watching the corral, and the area beyond, very carefully. She thought she saw movement and a flicker of light from a match or something. A flash of heat lightning confirmed

her suspicions but she ran very lightly.

Slim felt a hand on his shoulder shaking him. Drowsily he opened his eyes to find a worried young lady looking down at him.

"Slim! Something's disturbing the horses and Buttons. I think I saw somebody out near the haystack when the heat lightning flashed a minute ago."

Slim sat up quickly.

"Go back to the house and lock the door," Slim ordered her.

The girl obeyed without question or pause. It was like a game of hide and seek only far more dangerous. She needed to get back without being seen so that if someone was out there as she believed, they wouldn't know that the men had been alerted.

"Jess. Jess!" the older man hissed. "Wake up. Cam thinks we've got unwanted company out by the haystacks."

Jess was on his feet, with gun in hand, in a heartbeat. The two of them grabbed their gun belts which were close at hand and quietly edged out the door into the yard. Slim indicated that he would go to the right. Jess nodded and went left. Their feet made no sound.

Heat lightning continued to flash. While it gave the two men a chance to see where they were going, it also made it possible for anybody who was out there, that didn't belong, to see them coming.

Jess studied the shadows in the yard where the hay stacks stood. Had he seen a man's shadow or was the lightning playing tricks on his eyes?

Around the other side of the yard Slim was wondering the same thing. His doubts were erased when he saw the flare of a match being lit and thrown into the hay stack a few yards away.

"Jess! Hay stack's afire! Get water!"

His partner leaped to do as he was told and ran into a second intruder about to do the same thing. They collided with each other and both came up swinging. It was too dark to see faces but there was something familiar about the man that didn't quite register. A lucky punch, to his right temple, had Jess seeing stars long enough for the assailant to get away.

"Jess!"

Slim's urgent voice broke through the fog. Looking in the direction of his partner's voice he saw the flaming hay stack and ran for the watering trough. He was met there by Cam, who had gone into the house and quickly donned pants, a shirt and moccasins and was already pumping as fast as she could while the men grabbed the buckets and threw them on the flaming hay. Daisy, attracted by the noise, had her hands full keeping Mike from rushing out to help his brothers.

It took a full thirty minutes, but finally the fire was out and only one stack had burned. Both men were twice as hot as before only now their clothes were somewhat sooty and there were places where sparks

had landed on their sleeves. Slim had a couple of small burns on the back of his hands and Jess had a bruise on his temple where he'd been hit, but otherwise they were unharmed.

The lady of the house, and their young guest, tended to these minor injuries quickly, adeptly and without fuss. The men accepted their help without protest. Already tired, before they had gone to bed, they were completely exhausted after the events of the evening.

"Thanks," Slim said to Cam, "For everything. We'd have lost more than one haystack if you hadn't sounded the alarm."

"Yeah," Jess said. "That's sure true. How did you happen to see it?"

"I heard Mike fussing in his sleep so I got up before he woke Mrs. Cooper. Then I decided to get a drink. I was still hot so I came outside to sit on the porch for a few minutes. I could hear Buttons growling from his bed under the porch, and the horses were entirely too nervous for it to be the heat and the lightning bothering them. Then I thought I saw something in the shadows." She paused for a moment. "I'm still not sure I actually did see anything but I figured it would be better to be safe than sorry so I came out to the barn to alert you."

"Well I'm sure," Jess growled. "There's something about that fella that's familiar but I can't figure out why."

"I think we should all go back to bed now," the ever practical Daisy said. "You boys are exhausted and, Cam, I want you to go right back to bed. I'll take care of Mike this time." She smiled at the girl, "You did a wonderful job in alerting the boys to the intruders. Sleep in tomorrow until breakfast is ready. Everything else can wait until after."

"Daisy's right," Slim told their guest who was becoming more and more a part of the family. "You sleep in. Jess and I will do the milking and feeding and Mike will gather the eggs like he usually does. You deserve a good rest."

Jess rose, kissed her forehead and added, "If it weren't for you we could have lost a whole lot more than one hay stack. Go to bed. We'll see you in the morning."

Following his partner's example, Slim also rose and gave Cam a kiss on the forehead and headed back to the barn to hopefully sleep peacefully the rest of the night.

In spite of the excitement of the night, the whole Sherman household soon fell asleep. The men who had started the fire crept back into town with their tails between their legs, as Jess would say, to report to their boss that they had failed again. Jess Harper, and that black thunderbolt, were both unharmed. It didn't seem likely that he would be withdrawing from the race. Short of kidnapping a family member there didn't seem to be any way to stop him from being in that race.

Swanson, in spite of the fact that he wanted to win, knew that he didn't dare lay a finger on Sherman, the woman or either of the two

youngsters. The whole town would be down on his head let alone the law.

"We'll find a way, boss," his men assured him. "Harper won't be racing that black colt of his one way or another.

"No training session today, or tomorrow," Cam told Jess. "You both need a rest from the routine."

It was the morning after the fire. A thunderstorm, shortly after they'd gone back to bed, had cleared the air somewhat, but it was still damp and drizzly.

"A good day to work on harness repairs," Slim said.

"I'm going to help Mrs. Cooper with the cooking for the passengers and there's a lot of mending to do. Between you two, and Mike, I'm surprised the General Store doesn't make a fortune selling buttons and threads off of this place! You've got seams torn out, and tears and buttons missing on practically every shirt you've got - except the ones you're wearing," Cam kidded the men.

The men chose to ignore that comment and concentrated on eating. When they were finished they headed for the barn to start inspecting, and repairing, harness. Mike was forbidden to go with them because they couldn't keep an eye on him and the forge, which they would fire up to do metal work, at the same time.

Cam divided her time between helping Daisy with the mending and darning and keeping Mike out of mischief. The boy was allowed to ring the triangle announcing lunch and he was allowed to help with the stage teams, but he was not allowed in the barn while the forge was lit. Slim and Jess were too busy making horseshoes and mending buckles and such to keep him away from the fire. An active little boy was the last thing they needed under foot right now.

After mending a couple of Slim's shirts, and replacing the missing buttons on some of Mike's, Cam spent the rest of the afternoon reading to Mike, having him read to her and playing checkers with him. She gave him a solitary word game to play as well. Writing the word DICTIONARY at the top of a piece of paper, she challenged the youngster to find as many words, of three or more letters, among the letters in the word. That kept him busy for a while. He had to stop and think about how to spell some words and see if he had enough of the right letters.

When it came time for the last stage, Daisy had a table full of passengers to feed. Cam helped her serve the hot food while Mike was pressed into service to put bread, butter and jam on the table and remove the plates when the diners were finished eating.

When those dishes were washed, and dried, Mike was given the task of setting the table for the five of them. Daisy had ham, potatoes, fresh corn, grated carrots, biscuits hot out of the oven with apple pie for dessert served with fresh cream from their own cows. As usual the family watched as Jess packed away enough food to feed three men his size. Of course, being used to it, the dark haired cowboy completely ignored all the wise cracks that Slim, and Cam, sent in his direction. Mike giggled a lot and Daisy just shook her head. She'd been with them for just over a year but she was still amazed at

how much Jess could eat.

"I told Mrs. McAllister that Jonesy despaired of ever putting any weight on him," Slim laughed. "You're not having any better luck, Daisy."

"It's when he \_doesn't \_eat that I begin to worry," Daisy told him.

By noon on Friday the sun finally came out again. Everyone at the Sherman Ranch was glad to see it. The storm of Wednesday night, and the rain of the day before, had cleared the air. It was warm and dry with enough of a breeze to dry the laundry that Daisy and Cam hung out quickly.

"I declare, child," Daisy said as they folded the clothes, "I don't know what I'm going to do when you go home next week."

"Aunt Hannah told me not to be a burden. I help out at home, even though we have a housekeeper. When Slim and Jess stopped off at our place last year, we didn't have a housekeeper so it was me and my aunt doing all the work.

"You've been a big help," the older woman told her. "I will miss you when you're gone."

"I'll miss you, too," Cam told her. "And Mike and Slim and Jess."

"I'm sure the boys will miss you as well - in spite of their complaints," she chuckled.

"Oh, they don't worry me," the girl said. "I've been able to match wits with Slim Sherman since I was six years old. And Jess is no better, or worse, than Slim when it comes to teasing me. Mike, there, reminds me of some of my younger cousins and my friends' little brothers. He's a swell kid."

The noon stage came rumbling in just as they finished folding the now dry laundry. Daisy and Cam quickly threw together some sandwiches and brought the coffee, milk and a devil's food cake, frosted with vanilla frosting, to the table.

"Miss Ramsay?" Mose held an envelope out to her. "Got a letter here for ya."

"Thank you, Mr. Shell, and please call me Cam," the girl told the veteran driver. "I'm not used to being called 'Miss'."

The teen retreated to the bedroom she and Daisy were sharing to quickly read the letter. It was from her aunt letting her know who would be coming to Laramie to escort her home. One look at the name and the girl started laughing until tears ran down her face. Slim Sherman was in for one huge surprise come next Saturday.

Hannah had also included some money for Cam to have a picture taken of the entire family. She'd heard that there was a big horse race coming up and knew there would be a photographer on hand to document the events of the day.

"Is everything all right at home, dear?" Daisy asked when Cam returned to the main room as the passengers were re boarding the stage.

"Oh, everything's fine, Mrs. Cooper. Aunt Hannah is just letting me know who will be here to escort me home next week. And she sent me some money to have a picture of the five of us taken in Laramie on Saturday. She says they've heard about the race and figure that there's bound to be a traveling photographer there to record the event."

"She could be right," the older woman said. "Since I came west I've found that the traveling photographers show up anywhere there's a big event happening. This horse race is quite an occasion for the town."

"Hard to believe that the race is tomorrow. I sure hope my training sessions work out for Jess and Galway. It'd be nice to go home and tell Mr. Quinn that I used some of his methods to train a winner - even if it is only a small local race."

They worked together to clean up after the passengers and ate a hasty lunch themselves. The men were working far from the house today so old Ben had come over to take care of changing the teams. Cam and Mike helped him with the unharnessing and the feeding and watering once the animals had cooled out. It kept them both busy for a while. Then they went for a ride to some of Mike's favorite places that he hadn't shown their visitor yet. He was admonished, by Daisy, to stay away from the canyon where he had hinted he'd like to hunt for lizards. It was too dangerous unless Slim or Jess was along.

At supper, Slim asked Cam if she'd heard from her aunt, or uncle, about who was coming for her the next weekend.

"I had a letter from Aunt Hannah today. She says my escort will be on the noon stage. She also sends her love to you and Jess and a reminder to take care of yourselves. And not to be too much trouble for Mrs. Cooper."

"She said all that?" Jess asked.

"Yes."

"So who's coming for you?" Slim asked.

"One of my relatives. You'll know them when you see them."

This put the man's suspicions on alert. Cam was only evasive when she was up to something or trying to withhold information.

"I will, will I?"

"Yes, and that's all I'm going to tell you." The girl busied herself with her dessert all the while laughing inside. Slim was in for a big surprise.

Saturday dawned warm and bright with just a few puffy clouds in the sky. The people at the Sherman ranch rose and tended to the morning chores quickly. A couple of their neighbors had sent men, who were uninterested in the race, to cover for Slim and Jess for the day



since Mose and Ben would be in Laramie. Charlie Peterson was driving the Cheyenne to Laramie run in Mose's place. Mark Talcott would do the cooking.

As soon as the morning stage had left, Slim and Jess ran to the barn to get the buckboard hitched and the three saddle horses ready to go. All five horses, the stage team as well as the others, had been fed, watered and groomed. Their saddles, bridles and harness gleamed from the polishing Cam and Mike had given them the night before.

"Everybody ready to go?" Slim asked as he entered the house.

"Just about," Daisy told him. "Cam's packing some extra clothes for herself and Mike. Her aunt sent money for a picture of us so she's wearing her green dress until after we have it taken. She's bringing her pants and a shirt to change into." Daisy chuckled. "She's wearing her boots, instead of shoes because nobody will notice under the long skirt."

"That's right," Cam said as she came out of the bedroom she and Daisy were sharing. "Especially if I stand up in back between Jess and Slim while you and Mike sit in the front. Nobody will ever know I wasn't wearing my miserable high top button up shoes."

"Once a tomboy, always a tomboy," Slim teased her.

"That's right and you'd better not forget it," the girl said as she poked him in the ribs and then handed him her carpetbag with the change of clothes in it. She'd need it to put her dress and petticoats in afterward.

The family then climbed into the buckboard, and mounted their horses and headed the twelve miles west into Laramie. Excitedly, Cam and Mike discussed the possibility of Galway winning the race with Jess aboard. Nothing could sway the little boy from the belief that Jess was guaranteed to win. Jess would never lose.

"You'd better win that race, pard," Slim told Jess. "Otherwise we're going to have two very disappointed youngsters on our hand - one of whom has put a lot of work into getting you and that colt ready."

"Yeah, I know," the Texan replied. "Kinda nice to have someone believe in me like that."

The minute they approached Laramie they could sense the carnival atmosphere. There was, as Hannah McAllister had suspected, a traveling photographer there. The storefronts were draped in red, white and blue bunting. Merchants were holding race day sales. Many folks were dressed up as if for a national holiday such as Independence Day, which had come and gone a few days before Cam's arrival.

Mort Corey had deputized a couple of men to help him out with the crowds. He came over to greet the Sherman party as they pulled up in front of the livery stable.

"Boys. Daisy. Mike. Good to see you too, Miss Ramsay," the lawman said as he helped Cam down from the buckboard."

"Hello Mr. Corey," Cam said with a smile. "It's nice to see you as well and, please, call me Cam."

"You look mighty pretty in that dress, young lady," Mort told her.

"Thank you. We're having a family picture taken for my aunt and uncle. I've got regular clothes..."

"Boys clothes," Jess put in.

"...in the carpet bag. This dress is only for special occasions." She grinned at the older man. "Besides which my pants and old shirts are a lot more comfortable than all these skirts."

Mort laughed. "Well have a good time. There are games set up for everybody. The committee decided to turn this into a real occasion - more like a fair than just a race. The photographer is set up across the street from the General Store. I don't know how much business he's done but he's got a lot of people looking while he takes other folks' pictures."

"Picture first," Cam ordered. "I want to get out of these confining skirts as soon as possible."

They all laughed except Mike. First of all he thought Cam looked pretty and second of all he wanted to get out of the jacket and tie Daisy had insisted he wear for the picture.

The session with the photographer was quickly taken care of. Cam paid for the pictures in advance. There would be a copy for Daisy and the boys - all three of them, one for Cam's aunt and uncle and one for herself. She planned on picking them up after the race was over and they were ready to go home.

"Let's get some lunch," Jess suggested.

"Sounds good to me," Cam said. "I'm hungry."

"I thought you wanted to change clothes," Slim said.

"I do. I made arrangements with the lady at the dress shop to use her dressing room for a minute." Cam gave him a dirty look. "I'm going there and then I'm going to give you my bag to put in the wagon while the rest of us go to lunch. If you're lucky I \_might \_tell them that you'll be in in a few minutes."

The tall rancher reached out to tickle her, or pull on her braid, but she was too fast for him and ducked behind Jess who warded his partner off with a grin.

They arrived at the dress shop a couple of minutes later. Cam ducked inside to use the dressing room and changed into pants and shirt as well as one of the bandannas Slim and Jess had bought her and the hat as well.

"That's better," she sighed when she exited the shop and gave her bag to Slim. "Skirts are so confining!"

Daisy chuckled as Slim left to put Cam's bag in the wagon while Jess escorted the rest of them to the café for lunch. Once inside, Jess pulled two tables together to accommodate them. The café's tables were only big enough for four but there were five of them so they needed the extra space. There Slim joined them ten minutes later.

After a meal of beef stew with fresh bread and butter, coffee, milk and cherry pie for dessert, the Sherman party decided to wander around town and see what was happening. Daisy saw a chance to stock up on some material for curtains and tablecloths for the ranch and commandeered Slim to help carry the stuff.

Jess, noting that it was getting close to race time left them there and started toward the livery to groom Galway and get him ready. Little did anyone know it would be close to two hours before they saw him again.

As he passed the saloon, Jess was hailed by some of his friends, mostly poker playing buddies, who tried to get him to join them in a drink.

"Sorry fellas," he replied. "I've got to get to the livery and start getting my colt ready for the race. Maybe afterward." He thought about that for a second. "Now that I think on it a minute," he told them, "I can't. We've still got company. After she leaves next week, I'll come in and play some cards and have a couple of drinks."

With that he continued on his way, getting well wishes and good luck comments from a lot of the people he passed.

"Hey Mr. Harper," Dan Fulton greeted the Texan as Jess continued on his way. "I'm looking forward to racing you and Galway. See you at the starting line in twenty minutes right?"

"Hey Dan. Yeah, twenty minutes."

Jess continued on his way toward the stable while Dan walked on up the road toward the starting line, in front of the General Store, where the crowd was starting to gather as well as the competitors. As he walked along he took the shamrock charm out of his pocket. He'd promised Cam that he would put it on Galway's bridle before the race.

"Only for her would I do this," he mumbled to himself while shaking his head. "Or maybe Daisy or Mike. Slim wouldn't ask me to do something like this - he wouldn't give me something like this. It ain't practical."

So lost in his thoughts was he that he didn't even sense the trouble that lay ahead. As he approached the livery stable, Jess was suddenly pulled into the alley between it and the feed and grain store. Several pairs of strong hands held him on the ground as a masked man held a rag to his face. He struggled but it was useless. The chloroform-soaked rag did its job very quickly; Jess' limbs went numb and his vision and hearing began to fail him. The shamrock charm that Cam had given him for Galway's bridle fell from his hand. The dark haired cowboy lost consciousness in less than a minute. The assailant who was holding the rag with the chloroform on it held it over Jess' nose and mouth long enough to make sure he would stay unconscious

until they had him locked up somewhere safe. They wanted him out of the way until long after the race was over. Harper was not going to be in the race on that black thunderbolt of a horse he owned. Swanson's gray Connemara was going to win one way or another and no one would be able to prove anything about who attacked Jess.

"Hey, what's this?" Downing asked as he picked up the charm for Galway's bridle that Jess had dropped when he and his associates had jumped the Texan. "Looks like Harper's gotten rich. These look like emeralds. I think I'll give it to Ginny. She likes junk like this."

The four men then picked up Jess' limp body and proceeded to carry him to an old shack about three quarters of a mile away from the starting line of the race. Everybody in town was milling around in front of the stores and other businesses jockeying for the best position from which to watch the race. Nobody saw them as they opened the door and dumped Jess inside. It was close enough for them to get back and be seen mingling in the crowd but far enough away that their victim wouldn't be able to get back in time. Their employer had researched the anesthetic and found it was safer than ether. He wanted Harper's horse out of the race but he wasn't going to wind up facing a murder charge for using something that could easily kill the man if used wrong.

Once inside the shack, the group stayed until almost race time. Every time Jess showed signs of coming around the chloroform was applied again until he didn't move any more. Finally, about five minutes before the race was to start, they got ready to leave.

"What's this on his hat?" Britt asked noticing, for the first time, the Cameron crest pin Cam had given Jess the day she arrived in Laramie. He picked Jess' hat up from the floor and removed the pin. "I think I'll keep this. He don't need no fancy pin on his hat."

The five men left their victim lying on the floor unconscious and proceeded to make their way back to town by different routes. In order to establish an alibi they would make sure that someone saw them at the starting line when the race began.

"Look what I have for you, Ginny," Downing said to the saloon girl he was seeing.

"Oh, Pat! It's so pretty!" Ginny Carlton squealed.

"Not as pretty as you, honey," he told her.

"How do I wear this?" the woman asked.

"I reckon you could wear it as a necklace or on a bracelet. I'll take you to the General Store to order a chain for it later."

The pair made their way to the sidewalk where they stood to watch the race. For the time being Ginny put the charm in her hair, hanging it from one of her hairpins.

Slim made his way to where the others were waiting for the race to start. Like many townspeople they had situated themselves in front of the General Store where the race was to start and end. It was nearly race time and Slim was beginning to worry. Jess ought to be getting

Galway ready and heading for the starting line but there was no sign of him at the starting line nor was he walking down the street leading his colt to the starting line. The tall rancher had stopped at the livery stable expecting to find Jess getting the black colt ready for the race but didn't find him - only the Sherman ranch's entry in the race. There wasn't even any sign that Jess had been there.

"Has anyone seen Jess?" he asked his family and their guest.

"No, not since lunch," Daisy answered. "Is something wrong?"

"No. At least I don't think so. I don't know." He didn't know how to answer her. "It's just that the race is going to be starting soon and Galway's still in his stall at the livery. There's no sign that Jess has even been there."

"Slim? Why don't you go look for him? I can get Galway ready. The colt knows me. He won't give me a hard time like he might some stranger," Cam suggested.

Slim hesitated. Cam gave a significant look at Daisy and Mike.

"Go on. Mrs. Cooper and Mike can hold a place for us on the sidelines, here, while you look. It won't take me more than ten minutes or so to get Galway ready. Once he is I'll bring him right here - to the starting line. That way, when you find Jess, they'll both be ready."

It might have fooled Mike - though the youngster was more astute than the adults sometimes gave him credit for - but it didn't fool Daisy Cooper.

"You think Jess is in some kind of trouble, don't you," she said quietly so that Mike wouldn't hear. The boy was busy talking to his friends about how his brother was going to win the race because he had the fastest horse.

"I don't \_know \_for certain, Daisy, but it's not like him to not be ready well in advance. You know that as well as I do."

"Go look for him," Cam said with a shove. "I'll go to the livery right now."

Slim started toward the saloon. He figured it was as good a place to start looking as any. Jess' buddies might have seen him and talked him into joining them for a drink though Sherman doubted that Jess would want to drink before the race. It would be too chancy that he wouldn't have the control he would need. Plus there was Cam to consider. Nobody in her family drank and both Slim, and Jess, had been careful about doing so while she was staying with them.

He walked up to the table where a group of local cowboys were sitting, all good poker playing buddies of the missing man.

"Nick, Ted, either you seen Jess in the last half hour or so?"

"No. We saw him about the time he took your visitor, Mrs. Cooper and Mike to lunch but that's more than an hour and a half ago," Ted Mackle, a tall redheaded cowboy answered. "Why? Is something

wrong?"

"The race starts in about fifteen minutes. Jess isn't at the starting line and he's not at the stable getting his horse ready."

"We'll help you look," Mackle said speaking for himself and the others. "We asked him to join us but he was worried about being on time and having a beer or something while your young visitor is still here. He said he'd come in some Saturday after she leaves."

"Yeah, we've been real careful about that. Thanks for offering to help me look," Slim said. "Why don't you take the east side of town heading toward the Laramie Road? I'll take the west side starting at the Bakery and ending at the livery stable. He has to be here somewhere - he doesn't want to miss the race."

The other men, cowboys from the Double T ranch, quickly finished their beers and headed out the door with Slim. They headed in the direction Slim had suggested and started canvassing every house, and business, along the way asking everyone they met if they'd seen Jess Harper. Nobody could say they had except one man who had seen him go into Maudie's with Daisy, Mike and Cam. Other than that they got nowhere.

Slim was getting pretty much the same responses and it was driving him crazy. It was as if his partner had just vanished into thin air.

At the livery stable Cam quietly let herself into Galway's rented stall. The colt nickered and nosed her pockets expecting to find a treat. The girl laughed and pushed him away.

"No, silly. Not just before race time. You win that race and there'll be plenty of treats for you. Now come along, pretty boy," Cam crooned to the colt. "I don't know where your silly master is, but Slim's gonna find him." She picked up a curry comb and gave him a quick, but thorough, grooming, following up with a body brush and ending by combing his mane and tail.

When she was through with that chore she bridled Galway and saddled him. As she put the bridle on she noticed that the shamrock charm was missing.

"That's strange," she said to herself. "I know Jess was only humoring me but he did promise to put the shamrock on the bridle as a 'good luck charm' for the race today." Looking around she saw no trace of it on the floor of the stall or outside. Shrugging her shoulders, she decided that Jess must have planned on attaching the charm just before the race so it wouldn't get lost. Leading Galway from his rented stall, the teen took his reins and walked him over to where Daisy and Mike were waiting for the race to start.

"The race starts in five minutes. All horses entered in the race need to be at the starting line in three minutes," Mort Corey announced.

"Mrs. Cooper, has Slim found Jess yet? I don't see them anywhere."

"No, he hasn't," the older woman said. "At least I don't think so."

He'd have brought him right here, to the starting line if he had, I'm sure."

"Aunt Daisy? Is Jess gonna lose his money if he doesn't race?" Mike asked.

"What money is that dear?"

"You know - the money he paid to get into the race."

"He means the twenty dollar entry fee," Cam said. A determined look came over the girl's face. "No, Mike, he isn't." She led Galway over to where the Laramie sheriff was lining up the participants in the race. "Sheriff Corey, I'm riding Galway for Jess Harper," she announced.

"Where's Jess? Does he know about this? Or Slim?" the lawman was concerned about the girl's statement.

"We can't find Jess. Slim's looking for him." She gave Swanson's rider a dirty look. "There's nothing in the rules that say the horse has to be ridden by its owner - that I remember - so I've decided to ride in Jess' place since he can't be here."

Corey knew Slim and Jess well enough to know that Jess wouldn't have put up his entry fee if he didn't intend to be there. The fact that neither of them was at the starting line, and their young friend had Jess' horse ready to go, spoke volumes. Something was seriously wrong.

"I don't know about this," Corey said. "The boys probably won't like it."

"Jess paid the entry fee so Galway could run in this race. It's not fair to him to lose his entry fee just because he can't be here."

Dave Swanson protested vehemently. "She's not a resident of Laramie - or one of the ranches or farms! She's not eligible to ride in the race!"

Cam's brown eyes flashed angrily. Nobody was going to keep her from riding this race for Jess.

"Show me in the rules where it says I can't. The rules state that the rider has to be fifteen or older, and the horse has to belong to someone from Laramie or one of the surrounding ranches or farms. The race starts here, goes to that big clump of Indian paintbrush on the east road about two miles down, circles it and then comes back here to the finish line. There's nothing in them that says a girl can't ride in the race."

"She's got a point, Swanson," the sheriff said. "There's nothing in the rules that says girls, or women, aren't allowed to race. I ought to know - I helped write them."

"I was fifteen last month. This visit, to Laramie and the Sherman ranch, is my birthday present from my aunt and uncle."

"If she's fifteen she's old enough to enter," one of the other riders

said.

"She can do it!" Dan Fulton spoke up. "I've watched her for two weeks while we were helping train that colt. She can handle it!"

"Dan's right!" Tommy Everett said. "There's a whole bunch of us that can swear to it! It's not fair to Mr. Harper to lose out because something's delayed him!"

"I know he was planning on being in the race," Dan added. "I saw him not more than twenty minutes ago. He was headed for the livery stable."

"The horse belongs to Jess Harper. If he's not a resident of Laramie - or doesn't live on a neighboring farm, or ranch, I don't know who does," Cam stated. "That means I can take Jess's place - right Mr. Corey?"

"Sure seems like it to me," the sheriff greed. "She rides, Swanson, whether you like it or not." Turning to the crowd he shouted, "Everyone clear the course. Riders line up at the starting line. This race will begin in two minutes."

Cam led Galway over to where Daisy and Mike were standing on the sidelines waiting for the race to start.

"Mike, I need something from you," she said.

"From me?" the boy asked.

"Yes, I need a kiss for luck."

Mike obliged, though somewhat shyly, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

"Good luck, dear," Daisy said. "Please be careful."

Cam took a minute to shorten the stirrups on the saddle. She wasn't quite as tall as Jess, making the stirrups just a little too long for her. That done, she quickly mounted and walked Galway over to the starting line.

Mort Corey walked down the line of participants making sure that everyone was lined up behind the starting line. There would be no head starts in this race. He paused, briefly, to look at Cam in concern. She was, after all, a young lady and a friend of his friends besides. He'd never forgive himself if something happened to her. She grinned at him. Nothing was going to stop her. He shook his head and gave her a pat on the knee. Moving on down the line he made Swanson's rider, and a couple of others that were overeager, move their horses back a couple of paces. Once he was satisfied that things were as they should be, he went to the side of the road and took his pistol out of its holster. Raising it in the air he yelled "Ready! Set! Go!" and fired one shot. The race was on!

The horses thundered down the main street of Laramie with the crowds of spectators cheering. Daisy hugged Mike close as they anxiously watched Cam, on Galway, jockey for a good position. They were joined by a group of Cam's new friends. The older woman needn't have worried. Cam was doing just fine. Jess had come to see that she was a



natural. While she didn't get to ride that much at home, she'd taken to it like a duck to water, here at the ranch. She wasn't in any danger of being thrown by the colt. Whether she was in danger from other riders remained to be seen.

Slim was beyond worried at this point. The race was about to start and nobody had seen Jess since noon. Frantic was a good way to describe the tall rancher at this point. His partner had been looking forward to the race. They'd worked hard, Jess and Galway, himself, Cam and her new friends. Galway was ready. So was Jess. So why wasn't Jess at the livery stable getting Galway ready?

The hair on the back of his neck stood up and, for a moment, he almost bolted back to the stable suddenly overcome by a consuming worry that \_Cam \_was in trouble. He tamped it down. There were too many people around that would notice if something went wrong there. Finding Jess was more important. Obviously the younger man was in trouble or he would have been at the starting line - or close to it by now. Slim continued his search.

Swanson's rider steered Storm Cloud close to the rider to his left. Bill Destry tried to avoid the other horse but he was hemmed in. Cathcart leaned over and gave the other man a shove, then grabbed his ankle and pushed him out of the saddle altogether. Destry crashed to the ground with the wind knocked out of him on impact. His horse kept running until a spectator ran out and grabbed her reins. Caught, the speedy little mare calmed down and followed the man to the side of the road just as the other race participants thundered toward that stretch. Destry himself, was dragged out of the road by another spectator and none too soon.

Cam and Galway were still in the middle of the pack. The teen was watching everything and saw what Cathcart did. She made a point of keeping as far away from him as she could until the timing would be right for her to make her move. That time hadn't come yet.

Daisy, and Mike, stood in front of the General Store watching for the race to come back into town. They were joined by Brian Greenwood, Sandy Warwick, Diana Bolton and some of the other friends Cam had made since arriving in Laramie.

"Can you see them yet?" Linda Taylor, fifteen, a small girl with honey colored hair, asked.

"Not yet," Brian told her. "They'll probably be just about at the stand of paintbrush where they make the turn at this point. It'll be a few minutes yet.

"Do you children think that Cam is okay?" Daisy asked. "I'm not at all sure I like the idea of her being in this race but I couldn't think of a reason to stop her."

"I'm sure she's fine, Mrs. Cooper," Brian reassured her. "I've never seen anyone take to racing around on horseback the way Cam has. She's a natural."

"Oh dear. I wish I could be as sure of that as you are Brian."

"Mrs. Cooper, in the time that you've been living here have I ever lied to you?"

"No. No you haven't."

"Then trust me, Cam's going to be just fine."

Daisy decided to do just that. Brian had proven to be a good friend to the girl and was noted for his honesty and reliability. If he thought Cam would be fine, she would be. At least the woman hoped so. Somehow it just wasn't the same hearing it from Tommy as it would have been if it was Slim. Then again, if Slim were here, he'd probably be riding in Jess' place instead.

"Brian's right, Aunt Daisy," Mike told her. "Even Jess says she's a good rider."

Stan Cathcart, on Storm Cloud, managed to unseat a couple of other riders.

When he went after Dan Fulton, the youth saw him coming and lashed out with his reins. Hitting Cathcart in the face ended the attempt against him. Cathcart then went after Cam.

Not for nothing was Galway part Quarter Horse. Cam gave him the signal to move like he was going after a recalcitrant steer and he quickly turned on his haunches neatly avoiding the other horse by going to his right and circling around. The move took Cathcart off guard and he nearly fell out of his own saddle.

Cam and Galway quickly caught up with the other racers. The paintbrush was just ahead. They circled it and started back toward town. The black colt, with the gutsy young girl aboard, started making his move. When they were a quarter mile away Cam gave Galway all the rein he needed and they raced toward the finish line.

The wind, caused by Galway's run, blew some of Cam's hair loose from her braid. She paid no attention to it. She was focused on the race ahead. Other than Cathcart's attempt to knock her out of the saddle she was having the time of her life.

Jess moaned and moved his head and right arm as consciousness returned. He sat up slowly and immediately wished he hadn't when his head started spinning and his stomach churned. He sat, with his head down, for a moment before trying again. This time he managed to get to his feet but swayed dangerously.

He looked around him and slowly came to realize that he was in a building - maybe a warehouse - that was old, musty and littered with old packing boxes and trash. Staggering, he slowly made his way toward the door and opened it. The bright sunlight hurt his eyes and he quickly ducked his head and put his hand up to his eyes to avoid it.

The Texan stumbled out the door into the bright light that was assailing his eyes. No sooner had he exited than his worried partner came around the corner and saw him.

"Jess!" Slim was overjoyed to find his friend apparently unharmed - that is until Jess stumbled and fell and couldn't get back on his feet again.

"Slim. Sure am glad to see you," Jess said. "Help me up, huh?"

The older man reached down and helped his friend to his feet. It was a good thing he had a firm grip on Jess' arm for the chloroform's aftereffect - wooziness - was making it downright impossible for the younger man to stand, let alone walk unassisted.

"What's the matter, Jess? Are you hurt?" Slim was worried. Jess didn't appear to be hurt so he couldn't understand why he was having such difficulty.

"Nah. Just a little dizzy." As he spoke Jess tried to take a couple of steps but swayed and almost fell.

"A little? You can't stand on your own two feet without help, and you say you're just a \_little \_dizzy."

Jess put his hands up to shade his eyes and winced at the brightness of the sun and his friend's voice.

"Not so loud."

"Loud?" Slim was even more disturbed.

"Yeah, loud. I got a awful headache too."

Slim supported Jess and helped him to a place where he could sit down. He didn't let go of Jess' arm until he was safely seated.

"What happened? Where've you been, pard? I've been looking all over for you."

"Somebody jumped me as I was headed for the livery. They put a funny smelling rag to my face - chloroform I think. I passed out. I reckon I came to just before you found me."

"Any idea who did it?" his partner asked as Jess leaned forward with his hands on his head.

"I can guess."

"Swanson?"

"Him get his hands dirty?" Jess scoffed. "More likely it was Britt and Gordon and a couple of the others. I think there were four or five of them."

The dark haired younger man tried once again to get to his feet but swayed badly.

"Easy Jess," Slim steadied him. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Gotta get Galway to the starting line. The race is gonna start any minute."

"You're in no condition to ride even if we could get there in time," his friend told him. "That race is going to go on without you."

"What about the twenty dollars I paid? You wanta lose that?" Jess was determined.

"I'd rather lose twenty dollars than see you get hurt."

"I won't get hurt! Slim! Please!"

Slim stood his ground. Jess was not going to try and ride in this race. Of course, neither one of them knew that Jess' horse was racing anyway. It would be a few minutes before they acquired that knowledge. In the meantime Slim helped Jess to his feet again and they started to slowly make their way to the center of town to find Daisy and Mike so they could head for home. Jess needed to be checked over by Doc Collyer to make sure he was okay. When the headache went away Slim was pretty sure, from his own experience, that the nausea would go away. Daisy would be concerned but she'd take charge of the invalid and that would be the end of that.

As the horses pounded down the road toward the last half mile Cathcart regained his balance but it was far too late to go after Cam. He took out a couple of the other riders by crowding them until their horses stumbled but that was as far as he was going to get. He'd lost ground he couldn't make up and they were fast approaching the quarter mile mark at this point. The end was in sight and the black colt was steadily moving ahead of all the others in the crowd. Only Dan Fulton, on Warrior, and Tommy Everett, on Flapjack, were hot on her heels but Galway crossed the finish line ahead of them by two and three lengths.

The roar of the crowd told them that the race was well underway - if not over. Jess' face fell. He'd been looking forward to this race for two weeks and now, thanks to Swanson and company - though he didn't know that for sure yet, he'd lost his chance to prove that Galway was as fast, if not faster, than Drifter.

The partners made their way toward the street, Jess stumbling the whole way in spite of Slim's supporting arm. They were just nearing the street when a black, brown and yellow plaid blur streaked across the finish line. Slim's eyes went wide. He could have sworn that was Galway but, if it was, who was riding him? Jess was standing right next to him. He didn't have a substitute lined up in case anything happened to him. Neither of them had felt it was necessary.

"Excuse me. Coming through. Can we get by?" the tall rancher made a path through the crowd for himself and his friend.

The closer they got to the street the more Slim was positive that it was Galway that had won the race. Finally they broke through to the front row and his suspicions were confirmed. It \_was\_ Galway and that was Cam riding him.

"Jess! Jess do you see what I see? That's Cam - on Galway! From the way everybody's acting she must have raced - and won!"

"Can't be," Jess said. "Mort wouldn't let her ride. It'd be too dangerous!"

With Jess leaning heavily on him, Slim made his way over to the finish line where the black colt, and his rider, were surrounded by

well wishers.

"You were great!" Tommy told her.

"How did you ever dare?" Ellen Ryker asked her.

"I wouldn't have the courage!" Kathy Baker exclaimed.

"Cam! Great race! I almost had you at the quarter mile. All that training really paid off!" Dan Fulton had come in second, just ahead of Flapjack.

"What's going on here? Cam? Why is Galway here and not in his stall at the livery?" It was Slim and Jess finally catching up with their family.

Cam, still holding Galway's reins turned at the sound of his voice. Her face lit up when she saw that Jess was with him. She didn't notice that Jess seemingly wasn't feeling that well.

"Slim! You found Jess!" Cam didn't answer Slim's questions. She was too focused on the fact that he'd found Jess and that Jess seemed to be all right. "Jess! We were so worried. When you didn't show up to get Galway ready Slim went looking for you." She punctuated her words with a couple of ecstatic hugs.

Jess nearly fell over. If he'd recovered from the chloroform her hugs would have been returned just as enthusiastically. It didn't take Cam long to notice but she was soon distracted by a loud voice.

"I say it wasn't an honest win!" Dave Swanson was protesting the outcome of the race.

"Seems to me you've had a lot to say, Mr. Swanson - and none of it good." Cam's brown eyes were practically black she was so mad. "You didn't want me to ride but I did and I won fair and square." She looked at him through narrowed eyes. "Maybe you think it's not fair because your rider couldn't knock me out of the saddle and thus out of the race? Are you that desperate to keep that money you put up? Or the trophy? Maybe there's something you want to tell the good people of Laramie."

Slim's eyebrows shot up. Was this the little girl who had been so afraid of going to the dance she had practically begged to stay behind at the ranch. The one who had cried herself to sleep after being slapped and mistreated by Swanson's own nephew? It seemed that little Cam was finally getting past some of her insecurities. If she could face Swanson down, in front of practically the whole town, he didn't think her family, and friends - himself, Jess and Daisy - had anything to worry about any more.

Dan spoke up, "Your rider tried to knock her out of the saddle - and me as well!"

Tim Destry approached the group on foot.

"Cathcart pushed me out of the saddle and crowded several others until their horses stumbled!"

"He what?" Slim yelled.

"He tried to knock me out of the saddle, but Galway's not part Quarter Horse for nothing - we just made a sharp turn and avoided him." She grinned. "He nearly fell out of his own saddle when we did."

"You sure you're okay?" Jess was dizzy but he wasn't out of it completely.

Slim took her by the arms and turned her around to make sure she was telling the truth and not hiding something. Satisfied that there were no visible injuries - just a lot of dust - he put his arm around her shoulders.

"Jess? Where were you? What happened?" Cam slipped out from under Slim's arm to face the Texan who swayed dizzily and was squinting against the bright light.

"I'd like to know that myself," Mort Corey said as he approached his friends. "Your family was worried - as was this little lady."

"I was bushwhacked on my way to the stable," Jess told the older man. "Somebody - I think there were four or five of them - jumped me and knocked me out with chloroform. I only came around a few minutes ago. Slim found me and we've been making our way here ever since."

"Have any idea who did it?" the sheriff asked.

"I can guess but that's it."

"Yes, I'll just bet I could make a guess myself." Mort's eyes narrowed as he looked at the now silent Dave Swanson.

"Are you accusing me of something?" Swanson tried to bluff his way past the accusations.

"Yes," Cam said.

"You bet we are," Tommy agreed.

"We're accusing you of ordering your rider to do anything, and everything, he could to ensure that your horse won the race," the teenager told him. She was too mad to be nervous. Somebody could have been badly hurt.

The crowd surrounding them murmured. Not many of them were surprised to hear the accusations. His employees, Downing, Britt, George and McAleer crowded around their boss in a protective action.

"What have you got to say for yourself, Swanson?" Mort Corey asked.

"They're imagining things. In a race anything can happen," the freight line owner said.

"That's right," Walt McAleer said.

"Let's ask Mr. Cathcart who put him up to it," Cam said with brown eyes blazing.

The subject of their conversation was just now reining Storm Cloud to a stop at the finish line. He was a good ten lengths behind Tommy and Flapjack with a couple of other horses just ahead of him.'

Mort summoned Cathcart.

"Cathcart, get over here," the sheriff said. "I have some questions for you."

The freight line employee tried to elude Corey but the crowd gathered around the winning riders kept him from doing so.

"These folks are making some mighty serious accusations against you. I hear you were attacking some of the other riders. Tried to knock them out of the race. What do you have to say for yourself?" Mort asked.

"I ain't got nothing to say," was the belligerent answer.

"Maybe a little time in my jail will loosen your tongue," Corey said reaching for the man's arm.

"What are you arresting him for?" Swanson demanded to know.

"Assault with intent to kill," the Laramie sheriff answered.. "Anyone who deliberately causes an accident during the course of a race and tries to knock others out of their saddles, has murder on their mind I'd say."

Cathcart's friends started shoving people out of the way. McAleer, who had a couple of inches and about forty pounds on Mort slugged the older man which knocked him into the hitching rail behind them. The spectators, Daisy, Mike and other women and children stepped back.

Slim launched himself into the fray as did several others. James Britt and Myron George teamed up to take the tall blond out of the fight. Slim fought back and managed to knock George to the ground before getting a left hook from Britt. Pat Downing was struggling to free himself from two angry teenagers. Tommy and Dan had jumped into the fight and were doing a pretty good job of pinning him down.

During the course of the struggle Britt lost his hat. He had no way of knowing that that brooch, and the shamrock that Downing had given his girlfriend would be the link between them, their boss and Jess' temporary disappearance.

Downing stood no chance against the two boys. Tommy was all of six feet and broad shouldered. Dan was slightly shorter - about the same height as Jess - but lean and wiry. They had Downing out of the fight in less than five minutes.

Britt landed a punch to Slim's stomach that had the rancher doubled over gasping for breath. He took advantage of this to grab Slim's gun out of his holster.

"Hold it right there!" he yelled.

Everyone froze in place waiting to see what he'd do.

"I want a horse and a head start." He looked at Galway who was standing patiently with Cam and Jess who was unable to join the right due to the effects of the chloroform.

"No way!" Cam told him when she realized what he was looking at.

"Yes, little girl," Britt told her, "that black thunderbolt will do just fine,"

Cam wasn't about to let him have Jess' horse. She flipped the reins over his neck and slapped him on the rump scattering the crowd. By this time Slim had regained his breath and was tensed up waiting for a chance to jump Britt.

"You little brat!" Britt was furious. He pulled his arm back and made ready to slap her but Slim took advantage of his distraction and dove for him. The revolver Britt held went flying and landed about three feet away.

Cam ran toward it and picked it up. Slim didn't see her and Cam was at a loss as to what to do with it so she just held onto it.

In the meantime, while all this was going on, Tommy and Dan had managed to subdue Downing and had turned him over to Mort Corey. The two teens had taken all the fight out of him - for the moment anyway.

Several townsmen were running Cathcart down and dragged him down to the jail. They threw him in a cell and locked him up. One down that Mort wouldn't have to worry about chasing. The men went back to the scene of the fight. There they found Slim still fighting Britt. The rancher had a nasty looking bruise on his cheek but he was still scrapping. Jess was being held back from the fight by the some of the other spectators. He wasn't in any shape, still suffering from the effects of the chloroform as he was, to be doing any fighting. That didn't mean he was happy about it. He struggled to free himself but the men didn't let go.

At the same time McAleer, and George, were trying to escape. They had drawn their pistols and were waving them at those who would block their escape. Right about the time the two men had gotten clear of the crowd Slim managed to knock Britt cold. When he, and Mort Corey, saw the men making their escape, they went after them only to have to duck behind some boxes and a wagon.

McAleer turned and fired forcing the lawman to duck. Slim was unarmed at this point but threw an apple at the man causing him to stumble when it hit him in the leg. The tall blond darted out from behind his cover thinking he could get to the man before he recovered. He couldn't have been more wrong. He was in for a shock though as he faced the man who hesitated before raising the six gun he held.

"Slim! Catch!"

Cam had followed, against all advice and orders (Jess wasted his time telling her to stay put), and tossed Slim's gun - the one she'd picked up off the ground - to him.



Sherman heard her, turned and caught it in midair. Then he spun and fired. His shot was true. It took McAleer high in the shoulder. Relieved, Slim lowered his gun, walked to the wounded man and picked up McAleer's fallen pistol.

As he did so it suddenly hit him whose voice he had heard.

"Cam? Cameron Blair Ramsay what did you think you were doing?!"

Cam jumped when Slim yelled. She wasn't even sure why she'd done what she did. She didn't know how to use a gun of any kind. She wasn't sure she wanted to learn how. The only thing she could think of, when she saw the danger he was in, was that she had his gun in her hand, and she needed to get it to him.

"I don't know," she admitted in a shaky voice. "All I could think of was that you were in danger and needed your gun. Jess couldn't help and Tommy and Dan are holding onto one of Swanson's men - Downing I think." She drew in a shaky breath. "I did the only thing I could think of."

As she finished speaking, the teen suffered a delayed reaction to what had just happened and fell into her temporary guardian's arms in tears.

"It's all right. I'm sorry I yelled. It's all right." Slim crooned to her much as he had often done with Andy and stroked her hair.

"Is she all right?" Mort approached to take custody of McAleer.

"She'll be all right."

Slim held her tight until she was calm again. Then, together, they made their way to the sheriff's office to make their statements.

Two of the men from the Double T, Ted Mackle among them, took Downing to the jail. When all the other conspirators, including Swanson had been rounded up and brought to the jail the Sherman party and a group of others gathered to discuss the charges.

"Settle down!" Mort Corey yelled over the voices of the crowd that was gathered in his office.

When there was quiet he turned to Slim.

"You start. What happened this afternoon?"

"We came in for the race. Jess put Galway - the colt - up at the livery stable so he'd be comfortable and away from the crowds until it was time for the race. We went to the caf   for lunch."

"Then what happened?"

"I was a little late getting to the caf   so it was pretty late when we finished. It was getting close to race time so Jess started off to the livery to get ready. That was the last we saw of him until about fifteen minutes ago." Slim looked over at his partner who was sitting in one of Mort's chairs looking pale and sick. The effects of the

anesthetic were making him suffer from vertigo and a violent headache.

"When Slim said Jess wasn't at the livery stable I told him to go look for him. I said I'd get Galway ready and have him at the starting line waiting for when he found Jess," Cam gave her part of the story. "You know what happened next. Slim never showed up with Jess and I decided to take his place so he wouldn't leave the twenty dollar entry fee."

"Jess? Can you tell me what happened when you got to the livery stable?" Mort asked quietly.

"I never made it to the livery - least ways not inside," the Texan told him. "I was walkin' past the alley between it and the feed and grain when somebody jumped me."

"Did you see who it was?"

"Nah, not real good anyway," Jess closed his eyes tight as he tried to remember if there was anything he had seen that would help. "Nope. Last thing I remember clear is seeing Dan Fulton as he was headed for the starting line of the race."

"I saw him about twenty minutes before the race started," Dan confirmed. "He was headed for the livery and I was headed for the starting line."

"Slim came to the saloon looking for him," Ted Mackle said. "We saw him on the way to the livery stable and asked him to join us. He was worried about being on time and didn't want to hang around the saloon drinking while their company was here. He said he'd come in some Saturday after she goes home." He glared at Swanson and company. "A bunch of us, from the Double T and the Rocking Star, volunteered to help look for Jess. We didn't find hide nor hair of him."

"Slim?"

"A few minutes before the race ended I found Jess. He was just staggering out of that old shack on the edge of town - the one that the stage line used to use for storage. He was pale and dizzy - couldn't stand up, or walk, on his own and complained of a headache. Kinda like he is now." Slim eyed his partner with concern.

"I hate to say it fellas, but we don't have any proof that they kidnapped Jess but I can hold them for fixing the race and Cathcart's facing charges of assault with intent to kill," Mort told the group.

The discouraged group from the Sherman ranch watched as Swanson, Downing, George and Britt started to leave. It was Cam's sharp eyes that spotted the proof they needed that these men had, indeed, kidnapped Jess to keep him out of the race.

"Who's hat is this," she asked holding up a brown Stetson.

"Mine. Why?" Britt asked.

"Slim, let me see your hat for a minute," Cam said.

Sherman took it off and handed it to her.

"Just what I figured," the teen said. "You have yours."

"My what?"

The girl ignored him for a minute turning to the sheriff who was looking at her curiously.

"Give me another thirty minutes and I'll be able to prove that Mr. Britt, here, at the very least was involved in Jess' kidnapping."

"How are you going to do that?" Corey asked her.

"Just hold them here for that half hour," she said urgently. "I know how to prove it but I have to do something first."

"All right, thirty minutes. I'll have to let them go after that."

"Slim, where's that shack you said you found Jess at?"

"About a half mile from the livery. Why?"

"Show me," Cam said.

Confused, but curious, Slim went out the door with her. Dan, Tommy and Linda followed.

"You never went inside did you?" the teen asked her friend.

"No, I didn't see any reason to. I'd found Jess."

"But he doesn't have his hat. We need his hat."

"I know Jess needs a hat. What's so important about it?"

"The pins I gave you. You have yours. Britt's got the identical one on his hat," the girl explained patiently. "If we can find Jess' hat, and show Sheriff Corey where Jess had his pinned, and I show him mine, that I put on my hat for the fun of it when you fellas bought it for me, we can prove that Britt was in on the kidnapping!"

"Let's go!" Slim was eager to start searching.

They got to the shack, that Jess had been left in, in five minutes. Once there the group split up. The boys searched around the outside thinking maybe Jess' hat might have been dropped outside. The girls and Slim, searched the dim interior. They found nothing in the shack itself. The boys found the tracks of several men leading from the livery stable toward the shack. The group followed them back to their source.

"I know it's not inside," Cam said. "I would have seen it when I came for Galway. It must be outside somewhere."

The group started from Galway's temporary stall just to make sure. Dan walked down to the point where he had seen Jess just before the

race started. The rest of them searched around the livery with no luck until Tommy happened to wander over toward the feed and grain and found Jess' hat sitting in the shadows between the two buildings.

"I've got it!" the boy shouted!

"Let's see," Cam said, eagerly reaching for it.

She turned the hat around and located the spot where Jess had pinned his brooch the day it was given to him.

The group jubilantly headed back toward the sheriff's office. It was while they were passing the saloon that Linda noticed the saloon girl wearing a shamrock in her hair.

"Cam, didn't you tell me that you gave Mr. Harper a shamrock to hang from his horse's bridle?"

"Yes, why?"

"Look at that woman in front of the saloon. She's wearing one in her hair."

The woman in question was Ginny Mller, the girlfriend that James Britt was always bragging about. She turned and walked into the saloon before the group could get to her. That didn't deter Cam Ramsay. Much to Slim's shock she, Linda and the two boys walked into the saloon to confront Ginny.

The teens looked around the room until they spotted her standing near the bar talking to a customer. The sight of the four teens making their way toward her shocked the entire room into silence. It was stunning enough that two young men, known to be under age, were in the building but two young girls as well?

"Excuse me miss," Cam said. "I was just admiring that shamrock you have in your hair. Can you tell me where you got it?"

"My boyfriend gave it to me," Ginny told her.

"What's his name?"

"Pat Downing."

"I hate to tell you but that shamrock is stolen property."

"What?"

"Your boyfriend stole it from Jess Harper when he helped kidnap him just before the race."

"It can't be!"

"It is. I gave that to Jess the day I arrived in Laramie," Cam told her. "Furthermore, if you think those bits of green are emeralds I can assure you they're not. I paid for that out of my allowance and the money I earned doing small sewing jobs. I can't afford emeralds and I wouldn't buy them for a man anyway. Not even one who's becoming

an important member of my family. - honorary though that may be."

"Why that no good...Where is he?" Ginny was furious.

"At the jail."

"Come with me kids," the woman said as she marched to the door completely ignoring her employer who was calling her back.

The teens all grinned at each other. This was going to be good. Slim trailed along behind. He, too, anticipated the show they were going to be treated to.

Ginny stormed into Mort Corey's office.

"Patrick Downing! How dare you give me stolen property and tell me you bought it."

Downing jumped when he heard her angry voice. Slim, Mort, Cal and virtually everybody else grinned.

"Now, Ginny. What makes you think I stole that thing?"

"These kids told me! And I believe them!" She scowled at him and slapped his face - hard. "Some nerve!"

Turning to Jess, who was sitting at Mort's desk looking pale and sick, she said, "I'm very sorry Mr. Harper that my\_ ex-boyfriend \_stole this from you. I hope you believe me."

"Sure," Jess said. "I believe you."

She turned around and stormed out of the office. Slim stood back from the doorway lest he get stomped on as she passed. The teens all grinned. So much for Downing stealing Jess' shamrock.

"All right, Downing," Corey said. "In the cell with you. We've got you on kidnapping for starters and petty theft too."

"What about the rest of them?" Slim asked.

"We don't have any real proof about the pin, Slim. If you can show me that Jess had that pin before he was attacked, and Britt didn't have one at all, I'll be more than happy to throw the whole lot of them in jail. Where there's one rotten apple - in this bunch - there's bound to be more."

The teenagers all frowned. They thought they had it settled. While they were protesting Mike walked in. The boy didn't know what was keeping everybody and wanted to find out. Daisy was busy talking to Mose and Ben and some of the townsfolk.

"Slim? What's taking so long? Aren't we going home?"

Slim looked down at the youngster.

"We'll go home soon, Mike. We have to take care of something here."

"Ok." He went over to Cam and her friends next. "I got the pictures from that man with the camera," he told her.

"What picture is that Mike|?"

"You know. The one we did before the race."

Cam's eyes lit up and she looked at Slim whose face showed comprehension as well.

"Let's see it Mike," Cam said holding her hand out.

The boy handed his copy to her. "Aunt Daisy has the others."

"Slim! Look! There's Jess' pin on his hat!"

"Yeah, but that's only part of it. We need to prove that Britt didn't have one. How are we going to do that?"

"The photographer! He's been here all day. He must have taken other pictures before the race - maybe of the whole celebration!"

"You could be right!"

"What are you two talking about?" Mort asked.

"This picture shows Jess with his Cameron family crest pinned to his hat before the race. We had this picture taken right after we got to town." Slim showed his friend Mike's copy of the picture.

"That's a good start," the sheriff said, "but it's not enough."

"Sheriff Corey, according to the law you can hold these men for three days without pressing any charges. All we need is maybe an hour to find the photographer and look at all his pictures. He's bound to have at least one with them in it that will show that Mr. Britt was not wearing that pin before the race." Cam was well versed in the law as her cousin was a lawyer and she always wanted to hear about his cases.

"I must object, Sheriff Corey," Swanson spoke up. "The girl is grasping at straws."

"It must be mighty important for you to protest," Corey replied. "What are you afraid of?"

"Nothing. I merely point out that the young lady is overeager to help her friend."

"And you're awfully eager for her to not have a chance," Slim shot back at him. "What do you say Mort? Lock them up while we go looking for the photographer. In fact I think there were a couple of them. One might have been taking pictures for the Gazette."

"Go."

The group lost no time in leaving. Once outside they held a brief conference. They didn't know where the photographer was - he might have left town by this time - but they were going to look. They'd

look all over town and ask everybody they saw what they knew.

It was decided that Slim would take the saloon, the bakery and the feed and grain. The boys would go to the livery stable and saddlery. The girls would go to the General Store and the cafe. They'd meet in front of the general store in half an hour. The Gazette they would visit together.

The group searched high and low but without success. The photographer seemed to have left town already. Their first hint of where to look for him came when the girls visited the General Store. The man had stopped in to stock up on some canned goods, flour and coffee. He'd said something about heading for Willow Springs.

"Let's go," Cam said.

"Go where?" Slim asked.

"Toward Willow Springs, silly. We need to catch up with that photographer. He's bound to have the evidence we need!"

Slim hesitated for just a moment. "You're right. And he couldn't have gotten too far."

The group gathered up their horses with Linda having to borrow one from the livery stable. Cam summoned Galway with the special whistle she'd taught him to respond to when he was still a foal. The black colt responded instantly and came to Cam who quickly mounted.

Slim led the way since he was the oldest and also the most familiar with the route. As a representative of the stage line he could order cooperation from the other station master, though he doubted there would be any trouble once they explained their mission.

It took them a couple of hours, by which time the horses were as tired as their riders, but they got to Willow Springs just as the photographer was getting ready to leave. As soon as Slim explained their mission, the man was more than willing to show them his pictures.

The boys helped Slim and the photographer unload all the boxes of plates that he had so they could look through them. The man had only printed enough to give a few to the local merchants for display and those portraits that people had sat for.

The five of them, four residents of Laramie and their visitor, pored over every plate the man had in every box. They put aside any that looked potentially helpful planning on having the photographer make prints for them. By the time they were through they had nearly one hundred pictures they wanted printed.

"It'll take me a while," the man told them. "That's a lot of pictures you want."

"I'll help you," Dan said. "My uncle's a photographer. I've helped him in his dark room lots of times."

"All right, young fella, let's get started."

The two disappeared into the man's wagon to start. The others sat

outside, or in the relay station while they waited. After an hour Slim started pacing nervously. So much was riding on this. Jess could still be in danger if they couldn't prove what had happened. Sure the race was over but there was the revenge factor and the purse from the race that Cam had won.

"What's taking so long?" he muttered.

"It takes a while to print so many pictures," Cam reminded him. "We picked out a lot of pictures that might help keep those men behind bars. They need to be perfect - not too dark and not too light - if they're going to do us any good."

"I know," Slim said,. 'It's just..."

"It's just that you're worried about Jess and what might happen." Cam smiled at him. "Aunt Hannah would remind you that a watched pot never boils. I'm worried too - mostly about how Jess is feeling. It looks to me like the chloroform really got to him - or else they administered too much."

"That wouldn't surprise me," Tommy said. "They were pretty desperate to keep him out of the race to begin with. When they made sure he'd stay out of the race they may well have kept him under by applying it every time he showed signs of coming around."

"Mrs. Cooper and Sheriff Corey will look out for him," Linda said positively. "You shouldn't worry so much Mr. Sherman. I'm sure they probably sent him to the hotel to rest and Mrs. Cooper will have gotten him some ginger tea for help with the nausea."

Slim smiled. It seemed like the teens were determined to keep his mind off his worries instead of him reassuring them.

Ten minutes later Dan came out of the wagon with the first batch of prints.

"Here. Start looking through these. We still have a lot to print but this will give us a head start on our search." He handed the prints to Slim who divided them up between himself and the three teens who were waiting with him.

They went inside the relay station to sit at the table while they looked through the prints. Not a word was spoken except to sigh "That's not them.", "I think this is Downing but it's hard to tell with all the other people around him" and other such disappointed comments.

After an hour Dan came into the station with the last of the prints. He took his turn at looking at the ones the others had already inspected. He saw nothing more than they had seen.

"I don't believe it!" Tommy suddenly shouted. "We couldn't be so lucky!"

"What is it Tommy?" Slim asked.

"Look. Not only is it Downing and Britt before the race, the photographer accidentally caught them in the act of chloroforming Mr. Harper! Look!"



The rest of them crowded around and marveled at the evidence they held in their hands.

"He must have been taking pictures from roof of the bakery," Slim said in awe. "He wouldn't have been noticed and obviously he was just taking pictures of the town." He grinned widely at Dan, "We've got 'em Dan! We've got 'em. Can we get a few copies of this?"

"Sure," the teen said. "I'll make them up right now."

He hastened to the photographers wagon with the request for extra copies of it and the plate to put in the custody of Mort Corey when they got back to Laramie.

They gave Slim custody of the photographs, thanked the photographer profusely for his cooperation and headed back to Laramie a little slower than they had left. The horses were tired. Their riders, anxious though they were to get back to Laramie, didn't want to push them. They alternated between a fast walk, and a jog, until they got within two miles. Then they let their mounts out and pulled up in front of the sheriff's office at just about six o'clock at night. The crowds had thinned out and most of those who lived out of town had left with tired children in tow. They had chores to do at home before they ate supper and got ready for bed.

Mort was sitting at his desk when the group exuberantly entered his office. All were dusty, hot and tired. You wouldn't have known it by the look on their faces though. That was pure jubilation.

"We've got them, Mort!" Slim shouted as he handed the pictures to his friend the sheriff. "Every one of them. We even have them in the act of chloroforming Jess to keep him out of the race!"

The older man took the pictures with an unreadable expression - or perhaps - an expression of hope tempered by caution. One by one he looked at the prints that the tall rancher handed over to him. His eyes widened in disbelief as he looked at the one of Jess being waylaid before he could get to the stable for his horse. Pat Downing was seen looking up at his compatriots and his profile was quite clear in the picture. Others were identifiable by their clothes or the way they wore their hair. Britt was known for his distinctive hat band while McAleer was known for his fringed jacket. Nobody else in Laramie had one like it nor had anyone been seen wearing one that had passed through town in the last few days.

"This clinches it," Mort said. "They stay right where they are until the circuit judge gets here in a couple of weeks. Then they go on trial for assault and kidnapping and anything else I can think up."

He looked at the group of teens and Slim. "You three," he said to Linda, Dan and Tommy, "need to go let your folks know you're back safe. They've been worried about you." Then he looked at Slim and Cam. "I had Cal help Jess over to Doc Collyer's place. He came back half an hour later and told me that Doc sent Jess, Mrs. Cooper and Mike to the hotel. Jess was still mighty pale and sick when they left here. Cal says Doc told Mrs. Cooper to get a room at the hotel so Jess could lie down."

He smiled, "I imagine by now Mrs. Cooper has given Jess some of that ginger tea she was talking about and has him resting."

"Thanks Mort," Slim said. "We'll see you later. Come on you kids, let's get going."

The five of them went out the door and headed for their respective destinations. All of them were hot, dusty and tired. They looked forward to a good meal and especially a good night's sleep. Slim and Cam took Galway and Drifter to the livery stable to have a rest, some water and hay while they looked up their friends.

At the hotel Slim found out which room Daisy had taken. She'd gotten a suite so that Jess could rest peacefully and Mike could be entertained or put down for a nap if necessary. It had been a long and

exciting day for the boy. Even his boundless energy was going to run out at some point in time.

Slim knocked on the door to the suite. It was a very relieved Daisy who answered.

"Slim! Cam! You're safe! I was so worried when you left like you did."

"Sorry Daisy. The kids and I had to catch up with that photographer we saw earlier." He reached down to hug her. When he released her she turned to Cam.

"Are you all right dear? I was worried about you riding in that race but then I heard you were among those accusing Mr. Sanson and his employees of trying to - how do you say it - fix the race?"

"I'm fine Mrs. Cooper," Cam assured her. "Just hot and dusty and tired."

"I had the hotel kitchen send up some lemonade and Mike filled the pitcher with cold water." Daisy indicated the small table in the center of the room. "Have something to drink."

Slim poured tall glasses of lemonade for himself and Cam. Then they took seats and relaxed while Daisy reassured herself that her charges were truly all right.

"How's Jess," Slim asked after he'd slaked his thirst.

"Oh, he'll be fine. Doctor Collyer said that the man who kidnapped him gave him too much chloroform. Even half of what they gave him would have made him dizzy and sick. I gave him some ginger tea and made him lie down. He fell asleep shortly after that and I put Mike to bed, for a while, in the other bedroom." She smiled fondly. "Poor dear was worn out from all the excitement."

Daisy's blue skirt rustled as she went to the door of the bedroom she'd put Mike in. The youngster was just waking up and rubbing his eyes. His hair, blue print shirt and pants were all mussed and his face was swollen with sleep. His eyes lit up when he saw the older of his two guardians was back with their friend and both looked okay to him. He ran to Slim right away.

"Hey Tiger," Slim smiled as he hugged him. "How ya doin'?"

"Okay. I'm sure glad you and Cam are back. "I'm hungry."

"You are are you?" The rancher grinned. "Let me see how Jess is feeling then we'll see about supper here at the hotel before we go home. Rocky and Galway need a little rest before we go and I'm sure Cam's as hungry as you are."

"I think we're probably all hungry - except Jess," Cam said. "Uncle David's never had a patient yet that could eat much until at least twenty-four hours have passed. The chloroform really makes them sick for a while."

Slim walked quietly over to the door of the other bedroom and opened it. Jess was lying on the bed, covered by a light blanket, sleeping. With his long lashes and unruly curls he looked so much like a little boy that his partner had to smile.

"Jess?" Slim put his hand on the younger man's shoulder and gently shook him. "Jess, wake up."

A groggy Jess opened his eyes and squinted up at his friend.

"Slim? What time is it?"

"Going on seven."

"Seven?" Jess tried to sit up too fast and found the world spinning around him.

"Easy does it pard," the rancher told him.

"I'm all right," Jess insisted though his face indicated otherwise.

"We're going down to the dining room to have some supper before heading home. Do you feel up to it?"

"I could try," Jess said. "Not sure exactly how hungry I am but maybe some soup would be good."

"I'm sure Daisy will approve," Slim smiled. "I hear she's been fussing over you all afternoon."

"Yeah." Then it occurred to Jess that he hadn't seen Slim - or Cam - all afternoon. "Hey! Where've you been all afternoon? And where's Cam?"

"Cam's in the other room relaxing for a few minutes. We've had quite an afternoon - me and Cam and Dan Fulton, Linda Taylor and Tommy Everett. " Slim helped his partner to his feet. "I'll tell you all about it later."

The men made their way out to the sitting room with Jess still leaning somewhat on his partner. He didn't look quite as green around the gills, as Slim put it, as he had earlier but he wasn't back to normal either.

"We'll get you some peppermint tea, downstairs, dear," Daisy told him. "It will help settle your stomach again. When we get home you go straight to bed. I'm sure, in the morning, you'll feel like your old self again."

"Hi Jess!" Cam greeted him. "Did Slim tell you what happened yet?"

Slim shushed her. "Tomorrow. When he's feeling better we can tell him everything. Right now let's just get some supper and go home."

The group made their way to the dining room, ate a hot meal and headed for home without lingering over dessert. Slim and Cam were exhausted. Jess was still feeling somewhat woozy. Daisy was anxious to get Jess home and into bed. Only Mike had a lot of energy left and he was full of questions that he wasn't going to get answers to that night.

Once home, Jess was sent directly into the bunkhouse by Daisy who told him she would be in to check on him within the hour so he'd better be in bed sleeping.

Mike went inside at Slim's orders. It was past the boy's bedtime at this point. The youngster went albeit unwillingly.

Slim and Cam went into the barn to take care of Rocky, Galway and the team that had pulled the buckboard that day. All the horses needed a good grooming. Rocky and Galway got an extra special one and a hot bran mash as a reward for all their hard work that day. They'd been ridden into town, Galway had raced and won and then they'd raced to find the photographer. The slow ride back to Laramie had helped butt the horses, and their riders, were both exhausted. As soon as they were done they went into the house for cake, milk and coffee and then straight to bed. The two men who had tended the relay station that day had been dismissed with Slim's thanks as soon as the group from the Sherman Relay Station had arrived home.

The next day was Sunday. The extended Sherman family, and their guest, went into town for church services and a picnic lunch afterward. Daisy had hidden a couple of pies to contribute to the feast as well as some pickles and pickled beets. If she hadn't her boys would have found the pies and made short work of them. The lunch ran from eleven-thirty until one that afternoon. Cam spent most of the afternoon with Tommy, Dan, Linda and some of the other young people she'd become friends with. The teens took Mike under their wing, as well as some of his friends from school, and kept them entertained so that the adults could relax and enjoy each other's company for a while without having to worry about what their youngsters were getting into.

Mort Corey, and his deputy, stopped by long enough to eat, but couldn't leave the office unattended - not with both cells full of prisoners and a town to patrol,. They were given a good meal of fried chicken, potato salad and other such goodies as were available and then sent on their way satisfied and happy.

Before the group from the Sherman ranch left plans were made for Cam's new friends to hold a farewell party - weather permitting a picnic - at the ranch. Since she was to take the Cheyenne stage on Saturday plans were made for the party to be held on Friday. Slim was

a little reluctant, knowing how Cam felt about large gatherings but Daisy persuaded him that the girl would be all right as this was a group of friends - not total strangers like the dance had been.

Wednesday, after the morning stage had left, Slim, Jess and Cam drove into Laramie in the buckboard to get supplies and so Cam could do some last minute shopping. She wanted to get a couple of small gifts for her aunt, uncle and a couple of friends back in Evergreen.

It was while they were there that the members of the race committee approached the three of them to present Cam with the trophy and prize money from the race she'd won a few days ago.

"Miss Ramsay! Wait up!"

"Can I help you with something?" the girl asked as the man, and several companions, approached.

"You left so fast, after the race, we didn't get a chance to give you your trophy or the purse that you won." James Kendall explained, "We were supposed to award it right after the race but, well, you know what happened."

Jess, standing behind Cam grinned. Only since Saturday had he learned everything that had happened. His grin was going to disappear momentarily. Two stubborn friends were about to butt heads. One of Irish ancestry and one of Scots. Anybody who knew either one of them well would warn everybody to stand back and watch the fireworks.

"You really earned this trophy and the money," one of the other committee members said. "And as for your friends who helped you expose the men who tried to fix the race - we've already rewarded them with prizes of their own. They each got one hundred dollars - except Mr. Sherman. We will find some other way to repay him for his part in it."

The chairman of the race committee handed Cam the purse.

"Great race, little lady," he said.

"Thanks."

Turning to Jess she handed him the prize money.

"Here's the money Galway won."

"What are you giving it to me for?" he asked.

"It's your money."

"No, it ain't. You won the race, not me."

"Your horse won the race - I was just along for the ride, so to speak. It's your money."

"Slim, Mort! Tell her it ain't my money!"

Slim, and Mort Corey, had come out of the general store in time to

hear what was said. They stood grinning as they listened to Cam and Jess argue about the trophy and the prize money.

"It is so your money. It certainly isn't mine! What's a fifteen-year-old going to do with that much money?" Cam was digging her heels in, as Slim would say. Jess was just as stubborn.

"Your aunt and uncle want you to go to college. Put it in the bank. Give it to them. It ain't my money," Jess told her vehemently.

"It's not my money," Cam retorted just as vehemently.

Slim and Mort stood by, arms folded across their chests with big grins on their face.

After ten minutes of this Mort finally said to Slim, "Let me know who wins the argument but, please, get them off the street before somebody starts making bets on the outcome."

He slapped Slim on the shoulder, wished him luck and headed back to his office.

"Thanks a lot," Slim called after the lawman's retreating back.

Slim rolled his eyes and walked over to his two friends.

"Come on you two, you can work this out at home." He put an arm around each of them and ordered them into the buckboard. He climbed in after them and took the reins. All the way back to the ranch he had to listen to them argue about who the trophy and prize money belonged to. It was giving him a headache.

The next morning they were still arguing about it.

"Can't you two come to an agreement about what to do with that money?" Slim asked irritably. "You're driving me crazy!"

"It's not my money," Cam stated for what seemed to her like the thousandth time. "It's Jess'. His horse won the race. I was just along for the ride."

"Jess, Cam only rode in that race because you were missing," Daisy gently reminded him. "She didn't want you to lose out on your entry fee."

"It's still not my money," Jess insisted. "She won the race that makes it her money."

Cam was getting ready to say something else when Mike spoke up.

"Why don't you give it to that orphanage?" the boy asked.

"What orphanage Mike?" Slim asked him.

"The one you were reading about in the paper a while ago. You said they needed money to build and ex-ex-"

"Expand?"

"Yeah, expand."

Slim looked at the two verbal combatants.

"How about it Jess?" he asked his stubborn partner. "Take the money and give it to the orphanage over in Brimfield. It will go a long way toward their needs."

"If Cam agrees, okay," the Texan said, "but I won't take the money for me."

"Giving it to an orphanage sounds like a great idea," the girl said. "I could easily have wound up in one of them after my folks died if Aunt Hannah and Uncle David hadn't insisted on my coming to live with them."

"Good! It's settled then. No more arguments about it."

"And Jess keeps the trophy. It's going to have Galway's name engraved on it. I want to see it on the mantle next time I come to visit."

Jess opened his mouth to argue but Slim cut him off.

"Don't even start Jess. The trophy rightly belongs to the owner of the horse whether they rode in the race or not."

The dark haired younger man grudgingly agreed to keep the trophy.

The day before Cam was to leave, the Sherman ranch was the site of a gathering of all the new friends she'd made - including one very special young man. The yard was crowded with tables made up of planks set on saw horses that groaned under the weight of sandwiches, cakes, cookies, pies, pickles, cold fried chicken and all sorts of other goodies. The two youngest members of the Sherman family ate until they were stuffed and then ate some more. Both were ready for naps but the young people didn't let them sneak off. They got Jess involved in a horseshoe tournament - using some of Slim's horseshoes and driving stakes, that they brought with them, into the ground. A couple of the boys played catch with Mike, rode around the ranch with him - always within sight of Slim, Jess or Daisy and played tag. They inveigled Slim and Jess into joining them and then the fun really began. The air was filled with laughter as the group played tag, hide and seek and tossed a ball around.

The somewhat fleet footed Jess, and the long legged Slim, found themselves losing footraces to some of the town boys. Dan and Tommy were very fast and the older men underestimated them. The ladies, Cam and Daisy in particular, laughed to see the frustration on their men's faces. Mike just looked disappointed that his guardians lost.

Cam was plied with small gifts - hair ribbons, handmade lace, stationery, photographs of Laramie and her new friends and a couple of hair combs since once she turned sixteen she'd be starting to wear her hair up. Mort Corey was unable to be there but sent a note of thanks for her role in bringing down the gang that was fixing horse races and had kidnapped his friend to keep him out of it. He told her she was welcome in Laramie any time she wanted to come back.

After lunch they settled down in the yard to sing. Dan played the guitar and the others sang. They sang ballads and popular songs and some hymns just for Daisy. Among the songs they sang were Down in the Valley, The Cowboy's Dream. Tom Dooley (Daisy didn't like that one so much because she didn't think Mike needed to hear about a man who was hanged for killing his girlfriend), Amazing Grace and, finally Bound For the Promised Land.

\_ "On Jordan's story banks I stand and cast a wishful eye\_

\_ To Canaan's fair and happy land where my possessions lie\_

\_ I am bound for the promised land, I'm bound for the promised land\_

\_ O who will come and go with me I am bound for the promised land"

\_

Two adult baritones, a woman's sopranos, two young women's contralto's - one higher than the other, a tenor and a bass as well as one little boy's soprano sang out.

Before they knew it the afternoon was gone. The last stage of the day came through, headed for Cheyenne. The party broke up and everything was packed up, cleaned up and put away. Cam hugged her new friends and promised to write once a week to tell them what was happening in, and around, Evergreen.

Slim and Jess made sure the team, that had pulled the wagon holding the teens and their gifts as well as the food they had contributed to the feast, was properly hitched up then helped the girls into it. They shook hands with Dan and Tommy and the other boys and waved as they drove off toward Laramie and home.

A few hours later, after the evening chores had been taken care of, the Sherman ranch family, and their guest, sat in chairs on the porch listening to the crickets chirping in the night air.

"It's so peaceful to hear them," Cam said sleepily. "At home, it can be too noisy with patients or family members in and out of the house and the yard."

Slim looked at her and smiled. Fifteen she may have been but, sitting there with an equally sleepy Mike in her lap, she didn't look her age.

"Come on, Tiger," he said as he reached for Mike. "It's time you were in bed."

The boy murmured a protest but his head drooped on the tall rancher's shoulder.

"Cam? I think you ought to go to bed as well," Daisy said. "You still have to finish packing and you want to be ready when your escort gets here."

"Yes ma'am," the girl replied around a yawn. "Night everyone."

"Good night, Cam. See you in the morning," Jess replied around a yawn of his own. "Dang that's catchy!"



"Good night dear. I'll be along shortly." Daisy smiled as the girl headed inside.

The next morning - her last at the Sherman ranch - Cam slept in a little later than usual. The men, and Daisy, had agreed that she wouldn't be allowed to do any work other than packing her belongings for the trip home. Daisy was planning a special breakfast of ham, sausage, eggs, fried potatoes, biscuits and pancakes. It was the smell of the food cooking that woke the teenager.

"You know what I'm going to miss most about the meals here?" Cam asked with a twinkle in her eye as she watched Jess reach for the platter of pancakes for the third time.

"What's that dear?" Daisy asked.

"Watching Jess eat everything in sight - and three times as much as everybody else."

Slim roared with laughter. He'd long since learned not to get between Jess and his food - or any food on the table that looked unwanted.

"Very funny," Jess mumbled around a mouthful of pancake.

The early morning went by quickly. Daisy oversaw Cam's packing while the men tended to the stock and got ready for the first stage. It came rolling in, from Laramie, around nine o'clock. Cam's escort was coming on the Cheyenne stage so she went with Mike for one more tour around the ranch - the areas he was permitted to explore by himself. They got back just as the noon stage rolled in.

As the passenger alighted Cam watched for the one she was expecting. When a tall man - taller even than the six-foot-two-inch Slim - with dark red hair and brown eyes, dressed in black trousers, white shirt and blue coat along with a black stetson hat - disembarked she threw herself at him.

"Gordy!"

"Cam!" The tall man caught her as she reached him and swept her off her feet in a bear hug.

"I'm so happy to see you! How are Aunt Hannah and Uncle David?"

"They're fine but they're missing their little girl They're anxious to have you home again. Things are too quiet without you."

Cam laughed at his teasing. Her aunt and uncle never complained about her being noisy, On the contrary, it was their sons and their sons' friends that were noisy.

"Come over here," she said taking him by the hand, 'I want you to meet my friends."

The teen brought him to the house and introduced him to Daisy and Mike.

"Mrs. Cooper I'd like you to meet my cousin Gordon Carney McAllister - otherwise known as Gordy. Gordy this is Mrs. Daisy Cooper. She's Sim's housekeeper, cook and basically the boss around here as far as the house is concerned."

"It's a pleasure, Mrs. Cooper," Gordon McAllister said bowing over her hand and kissing it.

Daisy blushed like a schoolgirl.

"And the little guy here is Mike Williams."

"Nice to meet you Mr. Williams," McAllister said solemnly shaking hands with the boy.

Mike grinned as he shook Gordon's hand.

"Cam? You ready to go?" Jess walked into the house and stopped short. "I'm sorry. I didn't know you were talking to somebody."

"Jess, this is my cousin Gordon McAllister. Gordy, this is Jess Harper. He's Sim's partner in the ranch and fellow guardian of Mike."

"A pleasure Mr. Harper," Cam's cousin shook hands with Jess. "I believe you're the fellow who got sick a while back and stayed with my family for a couple of weeks?"

"Yeah, that's me." Jess grimaced at the memory of what had brought that about. "Your pa's a real good doctor and your ma's a great cook."

"You're right on both counts," Gordon smiled. "My father is a good doctor and my mother is the best cook I know."

"What's holding things up?" Slim walked in the door and stopped short at the sight of the tall redheaded man talking to his family.

"Mattie!" Gordon McAllister exclaimed. "How nice to see you again!"

"Oh, no," Slim moaned. "Not you. Why did it have to be you that came for Cam?"

"Slim! That's not very nice!" Daisy scolded her oldest.

Jess looked from one to the other. He sensed there was something between them but it didn't seem like it was serious - not real serious anyway.

"Mattie?" The Texan looked at his partner in curiosity.

"Yes, Mattie." Slim said with a look that said Jess better not ask - not that it did him any good.

"Mattie?"

Gordon McAllister laughed. "I think I'm the only person in the world who ever calls him that. It's his first nickname."

"It's short for Matthew," Cam explained.

"Matthew?"

"Yes, didn't Mattie ever tell you his real name?" Gordon asked.

"No, he didn't," Jess' blue eyes were dancing at the thought of having something to hold over his friend's head.

"Why he's Matthew Jacob Sherman, Junior,"

Jess burst into laughter at that revelation garnering him a glare from his partner who was not at all pleased to have that out in the open.

"You think that's funny do you?" Sherman growled.

"Yeah, I do," Jess replied.

"You've got a big mouth, Gordon McAllister." Slim tried glaring at his childhood pal but it didn't do him any good. Gordon just grinned at him.

"Oh, come on Mattie," McAllister laughed. "Loosen up."

"I'll loosen you up," Slim growled.

"You two start something here and I'll just have to employ Aunt Hannah's method of breaking up your occasional squabbles," Cam warned them.

"Are they always like this?" Jess asked.

"Only when Gordy wants to be funny and starts calling Slim 'Mattie'," the teen told him. "Or when Gordy reminds him of the mischief they used to get into - like convincing me that there was a brownie in the house and that said brownie lived in the attic and only came out at night to do some household chore and eat the bannock cakes and jam that were left for him. On special occasions it was porridge and cream and bread and honey."

"What are brownies Cam?" Mike asked.

"They're wee little people that live in unoccupied parts of houses - especially the big manor houses which are mansions like you only see in the cities in this country," Gordy told him. "They'll do things around the house but they expect a little reward - like the bannock cakes."

"Then there's the time the two of them tried to carry a five gallon can of milk into the house and dropped it in the kitchen because it was too heavy."

"Hey! We were only six years old when that happened!" Slim protested much to his partner's amusement..

"Yeah, but I remember Aunt Hannah talking about the mess and how the house smelled of sour milk for a long time."

"How about the time we took my sister's dolls and hung them from the apple tree in the side yard?" Gordy reminded Slim.

"Oh, yeah., I seem to remember you saying something about there being too many girls in the family and no boys to play with."

"That was before Duncan, Jamie and Keith were born. Gordy was the only boy for several years," Cam explained to the others. "Now their sisters are grown and married. Aileen lives in Denver, Bonnie's in St. Louis and Christie lives near Dallas. They're all older and were very fond of dolls. Gordy wasn't happy about it." She grinned at her cousin. "He worried about the house being filled with girls' things when Aunt Hannah and Uncle David brought me home but not to worry - I \_never \_played with dolls."

After a few more minutes of reminiscing it was time for Cam and Gordy to be on their way. Slim and Jess took Cam's trunk and suitcase out to the stage. The McAllister/Ramsay cousins followed them with Daisy and Mike bringing up the rear.

Just before climbing into the stage, Cam turned to Daisy and gave the older woman a hug.

"Thank you for everything, Mrs. Cooper."

"You're welcome dear. You be sure to keep in touch and come back again." Daisy returned the hug gladly,.

"Bye Mike," Cam gave the boy a quick hug knowing he wouldn't like it much if she kissed him.

"Bye Cam."

Next she turned to Jess and gave him a huge hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"Bye Jess. Take good care of Galway and let me know how he turns out as a cow pony - and don't forget to race him now and then."

The Texan hugged her back and returned the kiss on the cheek.

"I will. I'm not much on letter writing but I'll write once in a while."

"And don't forget to get that cup engraved with your names and the date of the race," she admonished him.

"I won't forget - Slim won't let me."

Gordon McAllister shook hands with Mike and Jess then kissed Daisy's hand again.

"Thank you for taking such good care of my little cousin," he said. "She's an important part of our family."

Slim was last. He stood beside the stage waiting for Cam and Gordon to climb aboard.

"Bye Slim," the teen said as she hugged him. "Thanks for letting me come. I had a great time - especially last Saturday."

The tall rancher bent down to hug her back.

"You're welcome. You take care. Tell your aunt and uncle I said 'hello'."

"Mattie," Gordon was still grinning. "Or should I say 'Slim'? Nice to see you again. Thanks for letting Cam come for this visit."

"Get our of here McAllister," Slim grinned. "Before I start remembering some of the less than flattering nicknames I had for you."

Once everyone was aboard Sherman closed the door and signaled to Mose to get moving. With a creak and a slap of leather, a rattle of trace chains and a "hup" from the driver the stage got under way with Cam and Gordon waving out the windows until the Sherman ranch was out of sight.

"Matthew Jacob Sherman, Junior huh?" Jess' blue eyes were dancing. "Mattie?"

"Don't start Jess."

"Mattie. I like the sound of that. I think I'll call you 'Mattie' from now on."

As he finished speaking Jess took off running with Slim in hot pursuit while Daisy and Mike stood by laughing at them.

End  
file.